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**Mark Richard Anderson**

**Theatres of Contention: Vital Instability in the Poetry of Byron and Shelley**

**Abstract**

This thesis explores the poetry of Byron and Shelley, emphasising their individual responses to shared poetic challenges. In particular, it examines the phenomenon of ‘instability’ of meaning in their work, arguing that such instability takes expressive forms more various and subtle than has hitherto been explored.

Broadly but not restrictively formalist in approach, the thesis offers a reading of the poems as, in part, enactive explorations of the possibilities and constraints of poetic making, to an extent which sets Byron and Shelley apart from other Romantic poets. Building on and, when appropriate, offering a critique of the work of critics fascinated by the poets’ language, particularly those writing in a New Critical and post-structuralist tradition, the thesis contends that by viewing the poems as explorations of the paradoxical possibilities of poetic limitation we might more readily see the ways in which they assert resistance to some of the critical characterisations ascribed to them.

By placing the two poets in a single study the thesis seeks to show patterns of affinity and difference. Its structure and organisation support this aim. The Introduction describes the method and contents of the thesis. Chapters One and Two examine enactments of instability within, respectively, the early cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and three Shelleyan lyrics. Chapter Three focuses on water and ruin as figurative vehicles for Byron’s complex attitude to substantiality, identity and relation. Chapters Four and Five examine how instability is explored through image-making in *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*, and text-making in *Don Juan’s* middle cantos. Chapter Six examines *Prometheus Unbound’s* relation with relation itself; it also examines the lyrical drama’s treatment of articulation and non-articulation, concepts central to the new reading of *Don Juan’s* English cantos offered in Chapter Seven, as Byron responds to the encroaching limitations of mobility and poetic expression.

**Theatres of Contention:**  
**Vital Instability in the Poetry of Byron and Shelley**

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**2017**

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## List of Abbreviations

<i>BCH</i>	Rutherford, Andrew, ed. and introd. <i>Byron: The Critical Heritage</i> . London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
<i>BCMP</i>	Byron, Lord George Gordon. <i>Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose</i> . Ed. Andrew Nicholson. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991.
<i>BCPW</i>	Byron, Lord George Gordon. <i>Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works</i> . Ed. Jerome J. McGann. 7 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1980-1993.
<i>BLJ</i>	Byron, Lord George Gordon. <i>Byron's Letters and Journals</i> . Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. 13 vols. London: Murray, 1973-1994.
<i>BMW</i>	Byron, Lord George Gordon. <i>Lord Byron: The Major Works</i> . Ed., introd. and notes Jerome J. McGann. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
<i>CPW</i>	Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. <i>Coleridge: Poetical Works</i> . Ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969.
<i>CPS</i>	Shelley, Percy Bysshe. <i>The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> . Eds. Donald H. Reiman, Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook. 3 vols. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999-.
<i>CWS</i>	Shelley, Percy Bysshe. <i>The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> . Eds. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck. 10 vols. London: Ernest Benn, 1926-1930.
<i>KMW</i>	Keats, John. <i>John Keats: The Major Works</i> . Ed., introd. and notes Elizabeth Cook. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
<i>LPBS</i>	Shelley, Percy Bysshe. <i>The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley</i> . Ed. Frederick L. Jones. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1964.
<i>SCH</i>	Barcus, James E., ed. and introd. <i>Shelley: The Critical Heritage</i> . London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975.
<i>SMW</i>	Shelley, Percy Bysshe. <i>Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works</i> . Ed., introd. and notes Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.
<i>SPP</i>	Shelley, Percy Bysshe. <i>Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts and Criticism</i> . Eds. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed. Norton Critical Editions. London: Norton, 2002.

WMW      Wordsworth, William. *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*. Ed.,  
introd. and notes Stephen Gill. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford:  
Oxford UP, 2000.

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Though she will never read this nor know of it, I owe much to Jacqui Lewis, an inspirational teacher who, back in a different millennium, suggested with a wry smile that, “yes, Mark, university might be worth a try,” understanding, but not letting on that she understood, how significant was this fork in the road. After some years on the other side of the desk, I recognise just how good a teacher you were.

I would like to thank Durham University for offering such a welcoming and welcome return to university life at a time when I most needed it, and a number of close friends who encouraged me to take that leap at a difficult time.

I would particularly like to thank my supervisor, Michael O’Neill, for his support, wisdom, guidance and reassurance throughout my studies. My circumstances have necessitated meetings at unsociable hours, and without such an understanding supervisor everything would have been far more difficult. At the start of the process he told me that this would be challenging but that where there’s a will there’s a way, and he was right. He was right about everything else too.

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## **Dedication**

To the memory of my mother, Jean Ann Anderson, who knew of my plans though she did not quite see them begin, and who would have been proud.

## Introduction

### “Our Singing Shall Build in the Void’s Loose Field”

#### I

The poetry of Byron and Shelley enacts a vitally unstable holding of meaning between twin sources of potential meaninglessness. On the one hand lies that which is unformed and unarticulated, possessing verity but lacking the communicative power necessary for meaning-making; on the other, the fixed poetic artefact created through the imperfect medium of language. This enactment is generally enriching but rarely unequivocally or uncomplicatedly so, and its operations are multiple, varying, and often surprising. In exploring its manifestations this thesis extends the scope of, and reassesses the implications of, the study of poetic instability within the poets’ work.

No existing joint study explicitly addresses the ways in which forms of achievement lie in the poems’ capacity to challenge, address and engage with the possibilities of failure, unsettling critical ascriptions through dialogical involvement with their own processes. Critical analysis has reached beneath the surface of the texts less often than those texts surely warrant; aspects of poetic operation are often recognised but not the undercurrents which disturb ostensibly fixed positions. This study offers a reassessment of the poems which is alive to their self-questioning engagement with their own propensity for enervation.

Although vital instability presents itself with differing emphases in the poets’ work, there are – to co-opt a phrase from Shelley’s Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* –

“generic resemblance[s] under which their specific distinctions are arranged.”<sup>1</sup> These include the following: that the operations of mobility are more numerous than has been considered; that those mobilities interact to create further mobilities; that ostensible stridency belies countervailing undertows; that this performative ambivalence contributes more than we might immediately recognise to the layering of the reader’s affective response; that the poems engage in dialogue with their own negation, propensity to be otherwise and status as creations, such that both the traces of the conjured ‘other’ and the fact and nature of its eschewal paradoxically form part of the work; that this dialogue takes place under conditions of levels of self-awareness which are themselves mobile and dialogic – that is to say, the poems variably engage with their own reflexivities; that the poets engage in a worrying of the distinction between separation and sameness; and that both poets attempt a qualified and inconsistent rejection of what I term the destinal fallacy, broadly but not uncomplicatedly valorising process over product.

Implicit in these commonalities are two observations which inform the critical approach of the thesis. First, that differing kinds of critically acknowledged *complexity* – whether of narrative swerve and scope (most recognised in Byron), proliferation of imagery (most recognised in Shelley) or some other kind – accompany a less explored but often remarkable *subtlety*. Second, that criticism which does engage with such subtleties can fall foul of an atomistic tendency which is ill-suited to the holistic conception needed in exploring multiple mobilities. Exploration of how a text makes meaning is most manageable when undertaken with an implicit relativity: analysis

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<sup>1</sup> SMW, 232. All quotations from Shelley’s poetry and prose, unless specified otherwise, are taken from this edition.

against a static frame, assuming in the moment of analysis the structural integrity of all hermeneutic planes save the one with whose operations we are immediately concerned. However, to understand Byron and Shelley we must recognise that one is apt to light upon any seemingly fixed position only to find it shift underfoot. Whilst this thesis at times challenges Jerrold Hogle's reading of Shelley, he is right to "want to point [his] readers toward the Shelley who stares out, with a sense of being incomplete and unbounded, at the possibilities of extending himself in space, time, and writing."<sup>2</sup> This outward-looking approach to conventional delineations is true of both poets, and demands an incisive formalism alive to the ways in which that which is pointed up by formalist analysis may impact upon and be impacted upon by other approaches and modes of analysis. Consequently, this thesis will approach the poems through a formalism which seeks to remove the blinkers which can be associated with such a mode.

One concern of Chapter Six is the way in which Shelley, in *Prometheus Unbound*, negotiates qualified processes of acknowledgement, refiguring, appropriation and rejection of cultural conceptions, texts and elements of discourse. It is a task with which I have some sympathy: both the critical landscape and critical lexicon generate valuable aids and potentially troublesome constraints in relation to this study's explorations. 'Mobility' – to use a key example – forms part of that landscape for both poets, but it is marshy ground: seen as cause for equally enthusiastic valorisation and opprobrium, it is sometimes worked around on surer footing, sometimes leapt over with hardly a backward glance, sometimes picked through on points of stability, and

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<sup>2</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of his Major Works* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), viii. Hereafter, Hogle.

sometimes immersed in, its shifting states a place in which both meaning and poem may be lost. That none of these approaches is sufficient becomes clear when we acknowledge that, beyond the poets' more explicit engagement with the term and its close cousins,<sup>3</sup> each of these approaches to mobility, and vacillation between them, is performatively enacted in the poets' own engagement with the landscapes of their texts. By 'performative', here and throughout the study, I mean the ways in which both poets enlist the meaning-making propensities of poetry's formal operations as contributor to the poems' explorations.

Though this thesis will use – has already used – 'mobility' with some regularity, it has made 'instability' its titular focus advisedly. Within this thesis, textual operations are mobile when they enact movement between two or more elements, perspectives, conceptions, propensities, images, meanings, representations, ideas, depictions, thoughts, forms of knowing or emphases. 'Instability' in this thesis encompasses all of this, but holds more clearly within its meaning that which it is not: its nature is bound up with an additional mobility of movement against the possibility of the stable and fixed. My thesis contends, first, that such stability and fixity holds for both poets the potential for meaninglessness, as the poem risks becoming an artefact stripped of the capacity to move, evoke and affect; and secondly, that both poets ameliorate this potential by their engagement with it. Mobilities have the potential to become stabilised *as* mobilities, and thus may constitute that from which a poem's operations enact vitally unstable movement: from stabilised mobility towards, paradoxically, a potential source of fixity.

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<sup>3</sup> Shelley's views on the relation between motion and mind in *A Refutation of Deism* and *Speculations on Metaphysics*, and Byron's on mobility in canto XVI of *Don Juan*, will be considered in Chapters Two and Seven respectively.

This thesis presents instability as ‘vital’ in both senses: an essential element of the Byronic or Shelleyan poem, and a fundamentally if not unremittingly enriching and enlivening principle, even as it engages with enervation. As a secondary but important adjunct, it is my hope that this thesis will assert, or reassert, the poetic value and significance of two poets who have often been, and in some ways still remain, “at once the centre and circumference”<sup>4</sup> of the canon. The distinction between instability and mobility has its role in this assertion of value, in that I am conscious of the latter term’s capacity to adhere more readily than I would wish to a conception of the poets’ work as not quite properly *meaningful* as poetry: the poems as expressions of meaning endlessly deferred, either in the sense of repeatedly displaced, or lost in submission to another cause, whether that be imagistic or narrative spinning, unrestrained polemic (political, social, millenarian), cultivation of a persona, or some other kind. The thesis seeks to wrest the poems from such characterisations by illuminating their engagement with such possibilities, and contending that critics often fail to acknowledge the extent to which the works operate in critical dialogue with the sources of censure ascribed to them.

In his note to the opening of canto II of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron bemoans how Athens, once “a theatre of contention between mighty factions ... is now become a scene of ... perpetual disturbance.”<sup>5</sup> It is a description of a great city in its fall which we might apply to these great poets in their ascension. Of the two elements of the description, the latter is surely most representative of critical opinion, whether that

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<sup>4</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, *SMW*, 696.

<sup>5</sup> *BMW*, 85. All quotations from Byron’s poetry, unless specified otherwise, are taken from this edition.

opinion be positive or negative in nature. This thesis suggests, however, that viewing the texts as “theatres of contention” is a fruitful, illuminating and accurate way of characterising their poetic making.

For each poet, a strain of critical response rightly responsive to the poems’ mobilities can sometimes be wrongly or narrowly assumptive of their uncomplicated operations. Close study which remains open to the subtle interactivity of these operations reveals the extent to which the verse points up its own imperfections, often succeeding by allowing ostensible failure to take its part in the layering of our affective response. The poems engage in dialogue with themselves, conscious of and in critical conversation with their evolution, in negotiation with their potential to be otherwise; undertows of stasis and fixity, and semantic roads that are glanced at but not taken, are indissolubly part of the Shelleyan or Byronic poem.

And yet ostensibly, for each poet, vitalising energies do indeed seem to be grounded – or resolutely ungrounded – within poems operating as seats of “perpetual disturbance.” The poets’ own pronouncements often support this view. As Chapters One and Two respectively attest, Byron states that *Childe Harold* is constructed “on no plan at all”<sup>6</sup> and that *Don Juan* shall be “a little quietly facetious upon everything,”<sup>7</sup> and Shelley describes “Mont Blanc”<sup>8</sup> as “an undisciplined overflowing of the soul”<sup>9</sup> in apparent eschewal of Wordsworth’s contention that poetry involves a subjection of

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to William Miller, 30 July 1811, *BLJ*, vol. ii, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Thomas Moore, 19 September 1818, *BLJ*, vol. vi, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Quotations from “Mont Blanc” are from the version published in *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (*SMW*, 120-24) unless stated otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> *SMW*, 721.

the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” to a more contemplative mediating process “in tranquillity.”<sup>10</sup> Jerome McGann is surely right in observing that often “we seem to be with Byron while he is actually spinning his lines,”<sup>11</sup> and Byron’s contemporary Francis Jeffrey, praised by Andrew Rutherford as an “exceptionally competent and influential reader” of Byron who makes “judicious assessments,”<sup>12</sup> seems justified in writing of the poet’s “perpetual stream of thick-coming fancies” and “eternal spring of fresh-blown images.”<sup>13</sup> Though its manifestation may differ, there is a concomitant processual immediacy in Shelley, and the “inextinguishable energy of sentiment”<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey finds in Byron has its echo in the “intense and overwhelming energy of manner” noted in Shelley’s work by the *London Magazine and Theatrical Inquisitor*.<sup>15</sup> Hogle, too, speaks to something many sense in Shelley when observing that “nearly every ... line is replete with abrupt transitions”; that “his verbal figures are continually dissolving and thus questioning their structures before any one of them has a chance to seem complete.”<sup>16</sup> And, fifty years earlier, in contrasting Shelley and Milton, C. S. Lewis surely chimes with many readers’ experiences when he writes of “the air and fire of Shelley, the very antithesis of Miltonic solidity, the untrammelled, reckless speed through pellucid spaces that makes us imagine while we are reading them that we have somehow left our bodies behind.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *WMW*, 611.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1968), 31.

<sup>12</sup> “Introduction,” *BCH*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Jeffrey, unsigned review of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, canto III, *Edinburgh Review*, February 1816. *BCH*, 98-109, 99.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Unsigned review of *Queen Mab*, March 1821, 278-81. *SCH*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Hogle, 3.

<sup>17</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1939), 28.



It seems to me, however, that Lewis' characterisation of Shelley is precisely wrong. The source of energy in the Shelleyan poem is not one of "untrammelled, reckless speed through pellucid spaces": in the vacuum of pellucid space – physical or imaginative – there is little to distinguish motion from stasis, and it is only in interaction with resistance that motion is made known; only through feeling that we are only getting so far that the sense of getting somewhere is glimpsed. William Keach expresses well the misconception into which Lewis, and Hogle to a lesser degree, fall, noting that "the writing may come to seem sheer when it is dense or resistant," which "may encourage us ... to look through or past, not at or into, the particular configurations of language in a given passage."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Robert Gleckner is right to suggest that "in judging only the surface of the poetry, we have found Byron, as a major non-satiric poet, seriously wanting. But we have ... [been] unwilling to probe beneath the admittedly forbidding surface of his language."<sup>19</sup>

This study "probe[s] beneath the ... forbidding surface" of Byron's work and looks "at or into" Shelley's "particular configurations" in order to show that vitality does not lie in motion being "untrammelled" nor in the theatre of its conception being "pellucid"; rather, it lies in the inconstant flirtation with the trammels of form and in the energising of language which the poet sees as having become pellucid in vacuity – as signifying nothing. Shelley writes in his *Speculations on Metaphysics* that "we do not attend sufficiently to what passes within ourselves. We combine words, combined a thousand times before. ... Our whole style of expression and sentiment is inflected with the tritest plagiarisms. Our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and

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<sup>18</sup> William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (London: Methuen, 1984), xiii. Hereafter, Keach.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1967), xii. Hereafter, Gleckner.

borrowed.”<sup>20</sup> Performative engagement with this propensity in language is an important part of how the poets make meaning. Yet it is as simplifying to see either poet’s work as always conducting a deliberate meaning-making interaction with linguistic pitfalls as it is to characterise their poetic making as attempted avoidance or even unambiguous amelioration of the same. Rather, their work enacts all these things at different times and sometimes at the same time, their interaction a source of vital instability among other vital instabilities.

Shelley’s perceived “intense and overwhelming energy of manner” is, then, germane insofar as this study seeks to explore the poems’ own engagement with their potential intensity, propensity to overwhelm, potential energy and enervation, and status as mannered. Similarly, Hogle’s observation has value insofar as I seek to engage explicitly with the ways in which Shelley’s lines question their own structures and at times question that questioning, and the ways in which they do not so much “do so before any one of them has a chance to seem complete” as deftly point towards their own possible completions in their turning from them. McGann’s view is of value specifically if we see the “spinning of ... lines” as embracing a sense of workmanship, self-questioning and craft as well as improvisation, spontaneity and virtuosity, and Jeffrey’s Byronic “thick-coming fancies” is of significance if we attend to the poetry’s engagement with their own potential fancifulness.

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<sup>20</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Speculations on Metaphysics. Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, ed. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1840), vol. i, 188-98, 191.

It is worth noting that both Lewis and, for the most part, Hogle, are – unlike for example Leavis, to whom we shall come later – happy in their assessment of Shelley, seeing sheerness as part of the poetry’s attraction, despite my feeling that it misses much of what is most interesting in his work. Conversely, although he writes sensitively on Shelley’s speed,<sup>21</sup> Keach sees subtly resistant operations as contributing to the poems’ achievement, whereas Simon Haines, for example, acknowledges this “resistant” quality but sees it as a qualitative negative.<sup>22</sup> Such curious critical vignettes, mirrored in Byron criticism with questions of, for example, facetiousness and sincerity,<sup>23</sup> are as good an indication as any of the enigmatic nature of the poets’ writing. For both poets, critics often differ widely not only on what their poetry *is*, but also on whether whatever it is makes it worthy of censure or praise: consequently, those critical of the poets’ works often wish the poetry were more like what their equally critical academic peers feel the poetry *is* like. This study makes no claim to forever untangle such contradictions; however, it does seek to offer some new perspectives on some of the assumptions – about the poets, about their specific poetics, and at times about poetry more generally – upon which elements of these contradictions are founded.

One claim I do wish to make is that manifestations of Byronic and Shelleyan mobility tend to display one, or both, of two features: the closing of gaps in the face of potential

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<sup>21</sup> Keach, 154-83.

<sup>22</sup> Simon Haines, *Shelley’s Poetry: The Divided Self* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 1-55. Hereafter, Haines.

<sup>23</sup> Jerome Christensen offers a concise and incisive history of the debate surrounding Byronic sincerity in his *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), xiii-xxv, mapping its critical history from its origin with Swinburne to its revival with McGann, though, as the title suggests, Christensen’s focus is the less-considered second element in Swinburne’s famous comment on Byron.

dissolution and the cultivation of gaps in the face of potential unity. Both movements draw attention to the simultaneous separateness and sameness of things, and if we wish to search for the life-source of the poets' work, we may do well to look here – at what happens in the crucible of these spaces-between. Sometimes these gaps are overt, sometimes reflexively acknowledged, sometimes subtle and atom-thin, sometimes strident and sometimes tentative: between poet and poet-figure, formal template and actualised poem, levels of consciousness and modes of apprehension, the world and the mind, failure and success, movement and stasis, meaningfulness and its lack, between a concept, sense, state or feeling and its opposite.

Explorations of sameness, differentiation and relation are central to the achievement of both poets, and often involve an announced awareness of constructedness, though the announcement may be whispered rather than declaimed; an establishment or suggestion of difference or separation which creates a space in which such concepts may be interrogated. One manifestation is, as I suggest in Chapter Four, the use of imaged projections vitalisingly interrogative of their own discreteness, such as the “veiled maid” (151) of *Alastor*. Another is the exploration of texts' similarity to and difference from that which they seek to represent – in evidence in, for example, Byron's use of figurative language. Another, related manifestation, is the poems' “self-conscious[ness]” – the way in which the “poetry ... displays awareness of itself as poetry”;<sup>24</sup> we see this in the consideration of textual fictionality in *Don Juan*, and in the formal texture of each poet's verse more generally. Yet another is the “preservation of distance” involved in the operation of irony, as John Lennard puts it

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<sup>24</sup> Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1997), xiii.

in his consideration of the term.<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Schlegel in relation to philosophical and Romantic irony,<sup>26</sup> and Anne Mellor in exploring the latter in relation to English poets including Byron,<sup>27</sup> each write of the centrality of a partial unity of opposition, in which both unity and partialness are equally important in the conception of their terms. Another interrogation of otherness takes place in texts' (and elements of texts') relations to other texts, such as in Byron's use of literary references,<sup>28</sup> and in the poet's and protagonist's engagement with their forbears in *Prometheus Unbound*. Finally, explorations of sameness, differentiation and relation are found in fleeting inflections of poetic making such as the "still cave of the witch poesy" in "Mont Blanc" and Asia's opening lines in Act Two of *Prometheus Unbound*. These varied explorations are united in their self-questioning awareness of possible otherness.

## II

The proposed destination of this thesis is a greater holistic understanding of the Shelleyan and Byronic poem, not of Shelley and Byron. To say so is not to suggest the fallaciousness of authorial intention, nor is it to abjure historicist contextualising – indeed, both the poets and their time are by definition contributory to that holism of understanding. Rather, it is to emphasise the centrality of the text to this thesis and, in doing so, to suggest that for Byron and Shelley the text has often been displaced from this central position. This thesis will offer no wholesale rejection of any one critical

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<sup>25</sup> John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook: A Guide to Reading Poetry for Pleasure and Practical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), xxv.

<sup>26</sup> See Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, "The Aesthetic Consequences of Antifoundationalism," in *Friedrich Schlegel and the Emergence of Romantic Philosophy* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), 165-74, for a discussion of this element of Schlegel's philosophy.

<sup>27</sup> Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980), 3-30. Mellor sees Byron as "the finest literary exponent of romantic irony," 4.

<sup>28</sup> See Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 4-5; 106-35, for a discussion of this aspect of Byron's poetry. Hereafter, Stabler.

school, for the simple reason that I would like to contend that proto-engagement with the precepts of a number of critical schools are themselves constituent elements within the two poets' works.

I would, however, like to make three assertions. First, that rarely in literature have there been two poets as biographically fascinating, with such a wealth of written testimony by and about them, than Shelley and Byron; as such, as figures they themselves assert a degree of vital instability in our conception of them, existing on the cusp of determinacy. Secondly, that this has exerted a degree of gravitational distortion upon a range of criticism to an extent that is less recognised than it should be. And thirdly, that one manifestation of this gravitational distortion is that there has been a tendency for them to be either stitched to ("like the thread of a stocking," perhaps) or severed irrevocably from (due to a "weakness [of] grasp," perhaps) particular schools of criticism. The present thesis proposes that the poetry of Byron and Shelley performatively refuses to be resolutely stitched to or irrevocably severed from anything.

I would like to suggest that tenacity of biographical influence constitutes one of three forms of criticism which take positions which are only tangentially criticism of Byron and Shelley's poems *as poems*. Of these three forms, which I will characterise as the biographical, the ekphrastic and the circumferential, the biographical might be seen as least influential because it seems so easy to spot. Harold Bloom, making his own division of the "major varieties of anti-Shelleyans," notes that three of his categories (which together relate most closely to my first category) – the "school of common

sense,” the “Christian orthodox” and the “moralists” – “need not be confuted, as they are merely irrelevant.”<sup>29</sup> I would suggest, however, that whilst their arguments need not be confuted as they are irrelevant as a qualitative measure of poetic achievement, biographical influence is more pervasive than we might care to admit because of its ability to transform itself into seemingly poetry-based critical sensibilities.

This thesis will show that in Shelley the ostensibly polemical is often performatively dialogical, the ostensibly strident performatively subtle. Less attention has been given to this than might otherwise have been the case, in part because one of the few points of critical agreement is the poet’s ardency: the strength of Shelley’s convictions and the passionate enthusiasm for their expression taken not so much as attested truth as accepted truism. James Barcus states that early reviewers “note a characteristic of Shelley’s poetry which all students of Shelley since have commented on: that much of the strength and beauty of his poetry stems from the firmness and fervency of his convictions. Both the disillusioned and disinterested readers and the committed revolutionary have noted this quality in Shelley’s writings.”<sup>30</sup> This is for the most part borne out in criticism itself, and Barcus is right to point to the representativeness of the aforementioned unsigned review when it states:

We apprehend, indeed, that the peculiar charm of Shelley’s writing is derived from that complete conviction which he evidently entertains of the justness and importance of all he asserts. This feeling, whether a man’s opinions be right or wrong, communicates a force and pointedness to diction, and an interest to composition, which mere labour can never bestow. All Mr. Shelley’s thoughts are feelings.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Harold Bloom, “The Unpastured Sea: An Introduction to Shelley,” *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in the Romantic Tradition* (London: U of Chicago P, 1971), 87-118, 114.

<sup>30</sup> *SCH*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> *SCH*, 72.

There are two things being said here, by both Barcus and the review: that Shelley's poetry possesses firmness and fervency of conviction, and that this is the source of much of the strength and beauty of his poetry. Both statements seem ostensibly reasonable: how, after all, can the first be questioned when we look to Shelley the person, launching bottles of revolutionary ire towards the "wild whirlwinds and the raging seas" (4)<sup>32</sup> beyond the Bristol channel and balloons "laden with *Knowledge*" to act as "A beacon in the darkness of the Earth" (12),<sup>33</sup> refusing to disassociate himself from *The Necessity of Atheism* though it might reverse his rustication, scribbling the Greek for "atheist" in Swiss hotel registers, and penning "Mont Blanc" in the face of Coleridge's challenge to challenge divinity.<sup>34</sup> As for the second assertion – that herein lies the source of the poetry's strength and beauty – well, if we accede to the first and we also agree that Shelley's poetry possesses *some* degree of quality, this second assertion must surely also hold true: firmness of conviction suggests an absence of nuance and equivocation; consequently, the sheerness of Shelley's stridently proliferating imagery must be fuelled by this ardency, dazzling and impressive if paper-thin, the poet a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain,"<sup>35</sup> conviction to the fore at the expense of crafting, of anchorage to

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<sup>32</sup> "Sonnet: On Launching Some Bottles Filled with *Knowledge* into the Bristol Channel," *SMW*, 9.

<sup>33</sup> "Sonnet: To a Balloon, Laden with *Knowledge*," *SMW*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Coleridge's "Hymn Before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni" is in part an expression of the poet's view, expressed in his note to the work: "Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!" *CPW*, 376-80, 377. "Mont Blanc" is many things, and one of those things is surely Shelley's answer to Coleridge's comment.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Arnold makes this statement twice in his works. Matthew Arnold: "Byron," *MacMillan's Magazine* XLIII (March 1881) 367-77, 377; and "Shelley," *The Nineteenth Century* XXIII (January 1888) 23-29, 29.



reality, of “grasp upon the actual,”<sup>36</sup> and even – as more than one reviewer or critic has had it over the years – of honest-to-goodness grammatical sense.<sup>37</sup>

Yet the actual operation of the Shelleyan poem is somewhat different. There has been a tendency in criticism of both poets to focus on the personality of the individual as a prism through which we analyse the poetry, not just in terms of *ad hominem* opprobrium from some earlier reviewers but in terms of failing to explore what is there due to an assumption that there will be little of a particular kind of poetic operation there to find. As Timothy Webb notes, “those who have written on Shelley have shown themselves peculiarly susceptible to legend,”<sup>38</sup> something also true of those writing on Byron. We look to Shelley’s poetry and see support for an ardency which our understanding of Shelley’s character predisposes us towards seeing, whether that is ardency of idealism, of scepticism (however ostensibly paradoxical this may seem) or some other kind: it is there in the proliferation of imagery and anchorless flights of fancy, an approach to poetic making which makes it ripe for explorations which focus

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<sup>36</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (Chatto & Windus, 1936; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 172.

<sup>37</sup> An unsigned January 1812 review of *St. Irvine* says of Shelley’s “description run mad” that “from one who, disdaining the common forms and modes of language, aims at sublimity both of thought and expression, a slavish subjection to the vulgar restrictions of grammar, a tame submission to the *Jus et Norms loquendi* [‘Rule and standard of speaking’] cannot reasonably be extracted. Exalted genius ever spurns restraint; and the mind accustomed to indulge in ‘a train of labyrinthine meditations’ cannot very well bear up under the trammels of common sense” (*The Anti-Jacobean Review and Magazine*, 69-72. *SCH*, 51). Shelley is “usually ... indistinct ... and absolutely unmeaning” (unsigned review of *Rosalind and Helen* in *The Monthly Review, or Literary Journal*, October 1819, 207-09. *SCH*, 160); *Prometheus Unbound* is a “tissue of insufferable buffoonery,” “maniacal raving” and “insane stuff,” a “melange of nonsense” in which “glimpses of meaning ... are soon smothered by contradictory terms and metaphor carried to excess,” the poet’s use of adjectives “prov[ing] the writer’s condign abhorrence of any relation between that part of speech and substantives,” and the Preface’s “bad prose” is “unintelligib[le]” (*The Literary Gazette, and Journal of the Belles Lettres*, September 9, 1820, 580-82. *SCH*, 226-35); the lyrical drama is “only nonsense, pure unmixed nonsense,” which is “generally unintelligible” (*The Monthly Review and British Register*, February 1821, 168-73. *SCH*, 252-53), or, as W. S. Walker has it, “absolutely and intrinsically unintelligible” (*The Quarterly Review*, October 1821, 168-80. *SCH*, 254).

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977), 2. Hereafter, Webb.

on the text as a process-driven dance of signification. The perception, though, is circular, self-perpetuating: Shelley's ardency means that his poetry proliferates imagery which has complexity but not subtlety; we look to the work and find a proliferation of imagery which has complexity but not subtlety, evidence of Shelley's ardency. It may be that all too often critics look to Shelley's work and find in it what they expect to see, and thus much of the poems' subtle performative self-awareness is missed, passed over or has an explanation ascribed to it which fits a biographical paradigm more tenacious than we might admit.

In his "Thoughts on Shelley and Byron," Charles Kingsley sees Shelley as the more dangerous poet because "Byron has the most intense and awful sense of moral law—of law external to himself. Shelley has little or none; less, perhaps, than any known writer who has ever meddled with moral questions."<sup>39</sup> But undertows of resistance within the ostensibly pellucid space of his text often point towards vitalising subtleties of moral confliction which are apt to be missed if, with Kingsley, we see "poor Shelley's mind" as that of "a sentimentalist pure and simple," a mind "altogether antipodal" to a "form of consciousness" which recognises moral law, a view of Shelley's poetics more grounded than we might admit in a feeling that "his whole life through was a denial of external law,"<sup>40</sup> which in turn is a view more grounded than

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<sup>39</sup> *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1853, *BCH*, 350-364, 355. Kingsley, three decades after the poets' deaths, suggests that whilst "Byron's fiercer wine has lost favour," it is "Shelley's form of fever, rather than Byron's which has been of late years the prevailing epidemic," and that "nine-tenths of the bad influence which is laid at Byron's door, really is owing to Shelley," 354. That his views are biographically informed is clear from his comment that "Shelley's nature is utterly womanish. ... Tender and pitiful as a woman; and yet, when angry, shrieking, railing, hysterical as a woman," to which he adds that "the physical distaste for meat and fermented liquors, coupled with the hankering after physical horrors, are especially feminine," 357.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-57.

we might admit in a critic's lack of engagement with the deft formal texturing of the poet's work.

If criticism of Shelley's poetry is shaped in part by biographically-inspired assumptions of ardency, something similar is true of Byron, particularly in relation to *Don Juan*, with regard not to ardency but its absence. We might, in fact, turn the unsigned reviewer's comment on Shelley on its head, and suggest that the peculiar charm of Byron's writing for some derived from that complete *lack of* conviction which he evidently entertains of the justness and importance of all he asserts. It is true that for every statement one might reasonably make about the poem, one often feels that the opposite may also be true – a characteristic which in itself fuelled much contemporary censure.<sup>41</sup>

In light of this, a number of approaches present themselves. Do we take at face value Byron's aforementioned assertion that he intends to be "a little quietly facetious upon everything," see it as a "vast exercise in contrapuntal points of view"<sup>42</sup> and remain "cowed by [his] deliberate – and undeliberate – contradictions,"<sup>43</sup> or should we see Byron's statement as self-consuming, and recognise that assuming that we can take nothing at face value is as great an interpretative misstep as taking everything at face value? Alternatively, one might approach *Don Juan* as if undertaking a mathematical proof, each perspective cancelled out by the presence of its opposite until we hold aloft

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Moore, whose comments on *Don Juan* in his *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: with Notices of His Life* Andrew Rutherford sees as "of interest mainly as echoing widely held opinions," states of the poem that "a facility in finding reasons for every side of a question may end, if not in the choice of the worst, at least in a sceptical indifference to all," *BCH*, 283-84.

<sup>42</sup> Gleckner, 268.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

what remains, the value of *x*. We might see the work as a proto-deconstructionist play of *différance*, an endless deferral of meaning – a critical approach to both poets to which this study gives attention but does not uncritically defer, specifically because of the poets' own vitalising engagement with the propensities which deconstructionist readings bring into relief. Or, perhaps, we might find justification for plotting a particular selective course through the text, ascribing greater significance to one assertion over another, deciding that all assertions in (and perhaps, therefore, about) *Don Juan* are meaningless/ful, but some are more meaningless/ful than others.

With each approach we feel the text temporarily formulated, diminished by misrepresentation or partial representation, before it wriggles free, as pugnaciously resistant to fixity and systematisation as Byron avowed himself to be. This study argues that much of what I have just suggested about *Don Juan's* relationship with critical interpretation is true of the poem's relationship with itself: the text possesses an awareness engaged in just such a mobile interplay with its own propensity for fixity and systematisation. The thesis explores not only the ways in which this awareness is partially performative in nature, manifesting itself not just in what is said but in how what is said is said, but also explores how the poem is involved in a tenacious worrying of this very distinction: at different times, and quite often at the same time, it both prises open and seeks to dissolve the gaps between that which is represented and the form of its representation. As Chapters Five and Seven explore in relation to the poem's middle and later cantos respectively, this performative subtlety of operation – greater than that which is sometimes ascribed to the work – has at its heart a negotiation between non-articulation and the too-fixed text. This study suggests that an examination of the nature of such a negotiation may be ill-served by an assumption

of “quiet ... facetious[ness] upon everything,” grounded more in tenacious biography than deep poetic engagement, which fails to acknowledge that Byronic facetiousness is often loud rather than quiet, and what is quiet and subtilized is the poet’s genuinely-felt interrogation of what poetic making may or may not achieve.

Contemporary criticism often sought to distinguish between Byron’s morals and poetry, even if at times it was to offer equal censure: in describing the first two cantos of *Don Juan* as “a narrative of degrading debauchery in doggerel rhyme” whose stanzas possess “not a tittle [which] could ... be dignified by the name of poetry,” the *British Critic* concludes that “the versification and morality are about upon a par.”<sup>44</sup> However, as with Shelley, criticism of man and poetry could be merged with little distinction: the *Literary Gazette* writes that “The whole composition is so utterly contemptible and incoherent, so disgustingly vulgar and obscene, so wandering in a metaphysical cloud of scepticism, and so destitute of any thing like a comprehensive or correct idea, so pointless and unpoetical, that it seems impossible that Lord Byron ... can be at the same time in his senses and the author.”<sup>45</sup> For Charles Lamb, such separation was moot: “I have a thorough aversion to his character, and a very moderate admiration for his genius—he is great in so little a way—To be a Poet is to be the Man, the whole Man—not a petty portion of occasional low passion worked up into a permanent form of Humanity.”<sup>46</sup> Swinburne criticises Matthew Arnold for, as Swinburne has it, rejecting that which “all sane men must be willing to concede,” namely, “that a school of poetry divorced from any moral idea is a school of poetry

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<sup>44</sup> Anonymous review of *Don Juan*, cantos I and II, August 1819, *BCH*, 258-59.

<sup>45</sup> Anonymous review of *Don Juan*, cantos IX, X and XI, 6 September 1823, *BCH*, 259-60.

<sup>46</sup> Letter of 26 May 1820 to Joseph Cottle, *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 1935, vol. ii, 279, *BCH*, 266.

divorced from life.”<sup>47</sup> He adds that “when we come to consider the case of Byron, we must allow it to be wholly undeniable that some sort of claim to some other kind of merit than that of a gift for writing poetry must be discovered or devised for him, if any place among memorable men is to be reserved for him at all,”<sup>48</sup> before pointedly failing to find anything of the sort,<sup>49</sup> despite offering a more measured critique eighteen years earlier.<sup>50</sup>

A prevalent strain of criticism during and shortly after Byron’s lifetime, however, acknowledges the disparity between the poet’s skill and perceived moral failings but in so doing suggests that this very disparity renders him more morally corrupt, and certainly more dangerous. “What a monster is a Man of Genius whose heart is perverted,” writes Wordsworth,<sup>51</sup> and Thomas Moore describes *Don Juan* as “the most powerful and, in many respects, painful display of the versatility of genius that has ever been left for succeeding ages to wonder at and deplore.”<sup>52</sup> Francis Jeffrey, a self-professed “sincere admirer” of Byron, says of the work’s “indecencies and indelicacies, seductive descriptions and profligate representations, which are extremely reprehensible; and also audacious speculations, and erroneous and uncharitable assertions, equally indefensible,” that “if these had stood alone, and if the whole body of his works had been made up of gaudy ribaldry and flashy scepticism,

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<sup>47</sup> “Wordsworth and Byron,” *Nineteenth Century*, April and May 1884, *BCH*, 464-79, 464.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 464. Swinburne’s attack is in part in response to Matthew Arnold’s 1881 assessment, in which Arnold voiced agreement with much of Swinburne’s more positive 1866 comments on Byron. Another example, perhaps, of Byron’s capacity to disrupt and disturb with a poetry which rubs somewhat uneasily against conventional touchstones of critical assessment.

<sup>49</sup> Swinburne writes of Byron’s “malevolent and cowardly self-conceit ... ever shuffling and swaggering and cringing and backbiting in a breath,” and of his “pretentious and restless egotism,” describing Byron’s “adorers” as a “very ignorant, impudent, and foolish ... rabble rout,” *ibid.*, 466.

<sup>50</sup> Preface to Swinburne’s *Selection from the Works of Lord Byron* (1866), *BCH*, 373-83.

<sup>51</sup> Letter of 30 January 1833 to Miss Kinnaird, *BCH*, 267.

<sup>52</sup> From Moore’s *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: with Notices of his Life*, 1830, *BCH*, 283.

the mischief ... would have been much less than it is” – they and other perceived immoral depictions “might have been comparatively harmless, if [they] had not been accompanied by that which may look, at first sight, as a palliation—the frequent presentment of the most touching pictures of tenderness, generosity, and faith.”<sup>53</sup> He adds that “the charge we bring against Lord B[yron] in short is, that his writings have a tendency to destroy all belief in the reality of virtue.”<sup>54</sup> Byron was dangerous because “the antidote is mingled with the poison, and the draught is more deadly for the mixture.”<sup>55</sup> For Hazlitt, such “mingl[ing]” amounted to an affront to the reader. Byron, he suggests:

... hallows in order to desecrate; takes a pleasure in defacing the images of beauty his hands have wrought. ... It is not that Lord Byron is sometimes serious and sometimes trifling, sometimes profligate, and sometimes moral—but when he is most serious and most moral, he is only preparing to mortify the unsuspecting reader by putting a pitiful *hoax* upon him. This is a most unaccountable anomaly.”<sup>56</sup>

Censure of the perceived crime is heightened because Byron commits it so well.

Biography also impinged upon criticism of Byron as excuse rather than censure: aiming to square the offending and aberrant circle of poetic facility coexisting with moral dissolution, critics pointed to the poet’s early life. John Morley suggests that “the higher part of [Byron] was consciously dragged down by the degrading reminiscence of the brutishness of his youth ... which hung like miasma over his

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<sup>53</sup> Unsigned review of *Sardanapalus*, *The Two Foscari* and *Cain*, in the *Edinburgh Review*, February 1822, *BCH*, 199-205, 200-202. Despite the review’s title, he is writing here primarily about *Don Juan*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>56</sup> William Hazlitt, “Lord Byron,” *The Spirit of the Age*, 1825, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, Centenary Edn., ed. P. P. Howe. 21 vols (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1930-1934), vol. xi, 69-78, 76.

spirit”;<sup>57</sup> John Addington Symonds that “Byron’s ... character was powerfully biased by external circumstance,” such that “the critic cannot ... neglect his biography,” including his being “left to the sole care of a violent and injudicious mother”;<sup>58</sup> and Hazlitt recalls James Northcote suggesting that “perhaps his lameness was to blame for that defect” of “immorality or misanthropy” in *Don Juan*.<sup>59</sup> Such “readings of *Don Juan* as case history,” the product of “personal misfortune and psychological oddity,”<sup>60</sup> further served to draw together poetry and personality.

As I set out at the start of this Introduction, analysis of vital instability must take place from a position whose formalism is outward-looking and attendant to other critical modes, and this study will engage with the poets’ lives in a number of ways. Further, Andrew Rutherford is right to suggest that, specifically in the case of Byron and relating to criticism during his life, our “conscious[ness] of critics’ bias in one direction or another” does not mean that we should fail to “contemplate [his poetry] for a time at least in the distorting mirrors of contemporary judgement,” as “such bias was assumed and exploited by Byron himself” and therefore “his works presuppose certain habitual assumptions in his readers – assumptions which he may indulge or outrage, but on which he is deliberately playing.”<sup>61</sup> However, I wish also to assert that distinguishing between person, poet, poet-figure, persona, and various poetic characterisations is more difficult in the case of Byron than it is for any other poet. Consequently this adds to the case to be made for an unaffected openness to what the

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<sup>57</sup> *Critical Miscellanies*, 1871, *BCH*, 385-409, 401.

<sup>58</sup> Preface to the selection of Byron’s poems in *The English Poets*, ed. T. H. Ward, 1880, *BCH*, 410-20, 410.

<sup>59</sup> From Hazlitt’s *Conversations of James Northcote, Esq., R.A.*, 1830, *BCH*, 285. It is impossible to determine the extent to which quotations ascribed to Northcote are *verbatim* or constructions of Hazlitt.

<sup>60</sup> Stabler, 41.

<sup>61</sup> “Introduction,” *BCH*, 12.



poem on the page is doing or attempting. I would like to suggest that Keach's aforementioned observation of Shelley's writing may have some application to Byron: both Byron's writing and the thinking underpinning that writing may "seem sheer" – may in some respects *be* sheer – but may simultaneously be "dense and resistant" in other respects, and our sense of Byron the person as well as Byron the poet may combine to "encourage us ... to look through or past, not at or into, the particular configurations of language in a given passage."

It has been fifty years since Robert Gleckner suggested that "modern criticism has all too often surrendered its normal and healthy critical curiosity to an easy understanding of content" when it comes to Byron;<sup>62</sup> it has been forty since Jerome McGann began *Don Juan in Context* by writing that the poem "is extremely difficult to talk about analytically. [It] speaks so well, so clearly, that one is often at a loss what to do to explain it,"<sup>63</sup> and ended by saying that it "does not imagine itself ... it imagines the world. It is 'created' to clarify the world of men, rather than the world of poetic processes."<sup>64</sup> I acknowledge the debt owed to McGann by Byron scholarship but agree with Jane Stabler that "McGann's unifying of Byron's style under a philosophical or moral ideal gradually but inevitably sacrificed a realisation of Byron's poetry at the level of the reading experience."<sup>65</sup> Despite works, Stabler's included, which have sought to redress this balance, there continues to be space for studies which seek to undertake the "recover[y] [of] the vitality of formal matters" she proposes;<sup>66</sup> studies which, as Gleckner wrote half a century ago, "approach [Byron's poetry] with due

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<sup>62</sup> Gleckner, p. xii.

<sup>63</sup> Jerome J. McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1976), ix.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>65</sup> Stabler, 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

regard for its integrity as poetry and without apology for considering seriously what perhaps may immediately strike our sensibilities as unworthy of such attentions.”<sup>67</sup>

### III

The second way in which criticism may fail to consider the poems as poems coheres around the school of New Criticism, though is not exclusive to critics clearly identifiable with that school. Often such critics are, to quote Shelley’s Preface to *Alastor*, seeking and failing to find a “prototype of [their] conception”<sup>68</sup> of what poetry is and should be. Rutherford notes that early critics of Byron, attempting to “reconcile [a] sense of his poetic greatness with a clear perception of his artistic weaknesses” found that their “attempts to resolve it” sometimes led to “thoughtful examination of their own criteria for poetic greatness”;<sup>69</sup> it is clear, however, that at other times, then and since and for both poets, such attempts were not made or, having been made, the “sense of” the poets’ “poetic greatness” was apt to break against the rigidity of critics’ criteria.

Swinburne, in describing Byron as “a poet of the third class who now and then rises into the second, but speedily relapses into the lower element where he was born,”<sup>70</sup> argues that:

... it would be absolute waste of time, for one who assumes it as indisputable, to enter into controversy with one who regards it as disputable that the two primary and essential qualities of poetry are imagination and harmony: that where these qualities are wanting there can be no poetry, properly so called: and that where these qualities are perceptible in the highest degree, there, even

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<sup>67</sup> Gleckner, xiv.

<sup>68</sup> *SMW*, 92.

<sup>69</sup> *BCH*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> “Wordsworth and Byron,” *Nineteenth Century*, April and May 1884, *BCH*, 464-79, 464.

though they should be unaccompanied and unsupported by any other great quality whatever—even though the ethical or critical faculty should be conspicuous by its absence—there, and only there, is the best and highest poetry.<sup>71</sup>

The “sad want of harmony in Lord Byron’s verses” is also noted by Coleridge;<sup>72</sup> indeed, Stabler is right to note that “contemporary reviews reveal widespread concern about the unstable compounds of tone, mood and allusions in Byron’s writing from the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.”<sup>73</sup>

Not knowing quite what to do with Byron and Shelley, critically speaking, outlasted the nineteenth century. Both have suffered more than most from critics’ reluctance to remain alive to William Empson’s suggestion that one “must rely on each particular poem to show you the way in which it is trying to be good,”<sup>74</sup> and thus the judgements of the New Critics in particular are often the result of being, to co-opt the words of Byron, “upon a wrong ... system”<sup>75</sup> when it comes to assessing what the Shelleyan or Byronic poem is trying to be and do. Consequently, ostensibly qualitative assessments are not so much of the poems as poems, but on the way in which they are *not* poems, according to a particular conception of ‘poem’ derived from what I see as an ekphrastic critical mode, in which the conceptual prototype tends towards the plastic rather than the performative. This critical bent implicitly embraces a twin atomisation: a valorising of the importance of the individual word or small combination of words as a discrete and in itself assessable unit as a measure of a poet’s quality and achievement;

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 464-65.

<sup>72</sup> *BCH*, 265.

<sup>73</sup> Stabler, 19.

<sup>74</sup> *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 26.

<sup>75</sup> *BLJ*, vol. v, 265.

and the importance of the finished poem as a clearly-defined and bounded object of art.

Such ideas are not entirely new. Thomas McFarland expounds a similar hypothesis in exploring the streaming rather than fixed infrashape in Wordsworth.<sup>76</sup> However, with Byron and Shelley, there is more at play than seeking an inflexible conceptual prototype and failing to “rely on each particular poem to show you how it is trying to be good” – and it is to do with the “trying.” In considering Shelley and Byron in relation to McFarland’s work on Wordsworth, I hope also to point towards why the two second-generation poets are fitting subjects for this thesis as distinct from their first-generation counterparts.

Drawing on the theories of Heidegger and the examples of Bultmann, McFarland is compelling in critiquing Marjorie Levinson’s consideration of “Tintern Abbey” in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems*. He argues that Levinson’s (to his mind) misapprehension derives from the fact that “critics, no less than poets, proceed from subliminal awareness of concrete shapes underlying the abstract wordage of the poem,” and that the infrashape of “the longer Romantic lyric ... differs from the infrashape of other kinds of poetry”<sup>77</sup> in that “the visual infrashape of the longer Romantic lyric was a stream.”<sup>78</sup> He summarises as follows:

It seems clear, in brief, that the New Critics, when they inspected a poem, were as much involved with a subliminally visible infrashape as were the Romantics when they generated their longer lyrics. But the infrashapes in the two instances were entirely different. The New Critics actually wanted a ‘tight and

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<sup>76</sup> *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), *passim*.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

systematic structure' in their field of view, even though such a structure is not favoured in nature over streaming entities.<sup>79</sup>

Like McFarland, I agree that the New Critics were wrong to, by and large, dismiss Shelley and Byron, and that the Romantics were attempting something different from that which the New Critics thought they were attempting. I also agree with McFarland's implication that the dismissal derives in part from a sensibility imposing judgement on what a poem *should* be trying to do. However, I do not agree that their dismissal derives solely from seeking a fixed infrashape in that which operates from a streaming one. For McFarland, "Tintern Abbey" is great because it accords with its infrashape: because it embodies its "Platonic conception of [it]self," to modify F. Scott Fitzgerald's phrase.<sup>80</sup> For all McFarland's divergence from the New Critics on the infrashape's nature, his view accords with a quite understandable critical paradigm which encompasses but moves beyond New Criticism: that a poem's quality derives from the degree to which it effectively creates a discrete work of art, in accordance with its infrashape. In such a view, quality and success are closely and, reasonably uncomplicatedly, allied.

However, replacing a fixed infrashape with a streaming one as a means of conceptualising the Byronic or Shelleyan poem is to misunderstand the operation of mobility within the poets' work. The poems' mobility does not derive entirely from a streaming infrashape, nor is their greatness derived from being well-realised "prototype[s]" of the "conception" of that infrashape; rather, both mobility and greatness are bound up with the ways in which the poems are at odds with their

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>80</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 2000), 95.

infrashape or its perfect consummation, or are negotiating a vitalising interchange with differing infrashapes. To a far greater degree than is the case in poetry generally and in the poetry of the first-generation Romantics, it is in their *attempting*, in the very enactment of their “straining after impossibilities,”<sup>81</sup> that much of the power of their poetry lies.

The implications of this are challenging for the critic. Qualitative assessment of the poems of Byron and Shelley is problematic because the poems of Byron and Shelley problematize success. Saying so is problematic because it appears to problematize the critical function, and to leave one open to claims of subjective apologia for a poet’s flaws. Nevertheless, it is true, and making such an observation is not to say that criticism should not be qualitative; rather, it is to say that there is a paucity of critical metalanguage which allows us to engage with the qualitative status of texts whose operations include a problematizing of success itself as a *de facto* consummation devoutly to be wished – poems which are to some degree performatively and equivocally engaged with their own achievement. The destination of a crafted poetic product is problematic to both our poets – the destination of *destination* is problematic – the poems enacting a complex relation with, as Susan Wolfson rightly notes of Shelley, “the poignant contradiction of mastery.”<sup>82</sup>

Creations which hold their creating are always destined to be inadequately served by the New Critical paradigm and its legacy. This thesis contends that much of the poems’

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<sup>81</sup> William Hazlitt describes Shelley’s style as “a passionate dream, a straining after impossibilities, a record of fond conjectures, a confused embodying of vague abstractions,” *Edinburgh Review*, July 1824, quoted in *SMW*, xix.

<sup>82</sup> *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 22.

affective power derives from the extent to which they maintain instability mindful of their capacity to calcify into the potential meaninglessness of the fixed or the endlessly mobile. The destinational fallacy that a state of finishedness is an unqualified positive is an ineffective lens through which to see and assess their poetry. If this is the case – if, as Michael O’Neill writes of Byron, the poets seek to “wrest life out of the entropic tendency of art, poetry, and culture to fall into fixed forms and lifeless conceptions”<sup>83</sup> – then the prism of an ekphrastic critical mode is only ever going to render the poems’ strengths as weaknesses.

This “wrest[ing]” is as central to the poems’ greatness as it is to the New Critics’ difficulties with them. As the *non plus ultra* of this particular strain of Romantic poetic making, Shelley is an obvious target for opprobrium. What for one person is Shelley “try[ing] to locate aesthetic work along routes of commerce between abstract principle and specific event, so that metaphysical form, embodied form, and poetic form might have open congress with each other in a capacious mimesis”<sup>84</sup> is another person’s “weak grasp upon the actual”;<sup>85</sup> by the same token, when Shelley says of *Adonais* that it is “a highly wrought *piece of art*, perhaps better in point of composition than anything I have written,”<sup>86</sup> though critics may debate the claim’s veracity they are likely, in a conceptual framework epitomised by valorisation of the “well wrought urn,”<sup>87</sup> to assume that Shelley’s comment is, firstly, a qualitative positive, and, secondly, that it is meant as such, rather than a merely descriptive or even qualitatively

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<sup>83</sup> Michael O’Neill, “The Same Rehearsal of the Past: Byron and the Aesthetics of History and Culture,” *Rethinking British Romantic History, 1770-1845*, ed. Porscha Fermanis and John Regan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 205-22, 219.

<sup>84</sup> Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, 22.

<sup>85</sup> Leavis, *Revaluation*, 172.

<sup>86</sup> *LPBS*, vol. ii, 293-94.

<sup>87</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947).

pejorative statement. There will be little critical will to tug at the reasoning behind Shelley's use of italics, or the use of "piece," or to consider the discrimination of "in point of composition"<sup>88</sup> even if they are open to such interpretations from elsewhere, such as the pointed specificity of Wordsworth's description of Shelley as "one of the best *artists* of us all: I mean in workmanship of style."<sup>89</sup>

The ekphrastic tendency has a second manifestation, with the difference being primarily one of scale. Where New Criticism may valorise the well-wrought perfection of the line or phrase without conceding the value of lines whose meanings extend beyond, assert themselves against and negotiate with crystallised conceptions, this study finds that ascribing to either poet an intertextual allegorizing schema, as in, for example, the work of Emily A. Bernhardt Jackson on Byron,<sup>90</sup> can at times be deleterious to a full conception of the multiform localised subtleties of the individual poem. It is for this reason that I at times depart from the reading of Shelley offered by Earl R. Wasserman despite its valuable insight and undoubted subtlety.<sup>91</sup>

Often with Shelleyan criticism, however, the undercurrents in critics' precise forms of articulation are illuminating with regard to the present study, with Wasserman's approach to *Prometheus Unbound* being a case in point. Despite my feeling that

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<sup>88</sup> James Barcus uses the phrase to assert that Shelley "claimed [*Adonais*] was" a "work of art," when the specifics of phrasing seem to warrant, at the least, a more circumspect and qualified précis. "Introduction," *SCH*, 32.

<sup>89</sup> Christopher Wordsworth, *Memoirs of William Wordsworth, Poet Laureate, D. C. L.*, 2 vols (London: Edward Moxon, 1851), vol. ii, 474.

<sup>90</sup> Bernhardt Jackson is right to consider Byron's "progressive speculation and testing" of ideas, but in ascribing to him an eventual "fully articulated philosophy" (that he comes to believe that "knowing is nothing more than claiming") seems to me to fall short of full exploration of, and more significantly may lead towards a subsequent lack of openness to, the subtleties of confliction within even his latest works. *The Development of Byron's Philosophy of Knowledge: Certain in Uncertainty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

<sup>91</sup> *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971). Hereafter, Wasserman.



Shelley's oeuvre is most fascinating in its conflicts and self-subversions and that much may be missed in exploring individual works through the prism of "the author's habits of mind as evidenced in his other statements"<sup>92</sup> – as Wasserman does when describing "the essential subject" of *Prometheus Unbound* as being "the One Mind; the extra-mental actuating power is the source of its events; and the drama ... the history of the One Mind's evolution into perfection"<sup>93</sup> – nevertheless his statement that "an explicatory procedure directed too narrowly toward a single text ... neglects a larger operative context"<sup>94</sup> would, if applied intra- rather than intertextually, stand well as an expression of what I feel may be missed in Shelley's work: the "larger operative context" within, rather than across, texts. In this respect I feel Wasserman's instincts are often right in their explorations of complex interactions even if those interactions are across a broader base than is always helpful; as Chapter Six will show, where Wasserman's analysis at times falls short is in the metaphysical schema's natural tendency towards ascribing discrete allegorising identities to figures whose operations involve the complicating of and shrugging off of such assertions.

In suggesting the benefits of critical attendance to the performative subtleties of *Prometheus Unbound* it is tempting to unequivocally valorise the incisive explorations of William Keach and in doing so repeat with gusto Harold Bloom's observation that "the contemporary danger this poem faces is that of readers crediting a very subtle poet with too little awareness of what he was doing."<sup>95</sup> However, whilst Bloom is correct to point up Shelley's subtlety, much of what is most subtle in his work may be

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<sup>92</sup> Wasserman, viii.

<sup>93</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound": A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965), 31.

<sup>94</sup> Wasserman, viii.

<sup>95</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1959), 94. Hereafter, Bloom.

lost to us if we credit Shelley with too *much* awareness of what he was doing, or if we see “awareness” in Shelley’s work as an uncomplicated and static thing, rather than something multi-layered and shifting. Keach’s subtle analysis goes some way to redress a critical over-attendance to Shelley’s explication of broader vision, but often stops short of considering the ways in which the conflicting pulls of the verse are often inflected with subtleties which seem beyond the purview of conscious construction. Similarly, for all this thesis’ exploration of Byronic subtlety it is not quite right to say that Byron exercises supreme control over language; rather, he exercises supreme control over the *extent* to which he exercises control, understanding the power of judicious relinquishment and concession to the accident of linguistic articulation. With Shelley, the picture is more complex still: supreme control, control over the extent to which he exercises control, and a processual wrestling with the degree of consciousness at which concession and control takes place all occur at different times – even at the same time – in his work.

#### IV

The third way in which criticism has sometimes failed to fully assess the poems as poems is the circumferential mode, one which has adherents in early criticism but which manifests itself in the mid-late twentieth century under a different, post-Derridean guise. With Shelley, it is a tendency to be somewhat blinded by his dazzling proliferation of images and to extrapolate from their prevalence the view that the works are exercises in complex linguistic play, a consequence of poetic immaturity in-keeping with the poet’s moral and political naivety (as several early critics have it)<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> For example, John Gibson Lockhart’s review of the *Alastor* volume states that he “cherish[es] high hopes of this gifted but wayward man,” given “due discipline and self-management,” and that “a great genius like his should scorn, now that it has reached the maturity of manhood, to adopt a species of

or a kind of proto-deconstructionist dance of imperfect signification:<sup>97</sup> that Shelley's poems are patternings which tend towards different shades of meaninglessness, all circumference and no centre, and *de facto* not, as I contend them to be, possessed of a greater subtlety of both thought and effect.<sup>98</sup> For Byron, it is the dazzling proliferation of digressions and assumed positions, and the unbounded openness of *Don Juan* in particular, which lead to similar charges, along with, I would suggest, the Byronic persona, his "inveterate self-contradiction" and "pooh-poohing of his own serious poetic purpose."<sup>99</sup> When the heavyweights of early twentieth century criticism turned their attention to the two poets, their opprobrium seemed grounded in a fixed conception of what a poem should be, and in each case, their criticism had a circumferential sensibility, Eliot's contention that "if Byron had distilled his verse, there would have been nothing whatever left"<sup>100</sup> chiming with Leavis' view that "there

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poetry in which the difficulties of the art may be so conveniently blinked, and weakness find so easy a refuge in obscurity," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1819, *SCH*, 101-102.

<sup>97</sup> Though Derrida himself engages with Shelley in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), perhaps the most notable such work is Paul de Man's "Shelley Disfigured" (*The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1974), 93-124), described by Timothy Morton as an "exacting reading of the way in which *The Triumph of Life* shoots itself in the epistemological foot, deconstructing itself before the reader has a chance to do it" ("Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 9). However, Shelley's proliferating imagery has long been a source of comment. The *American Quarterly Review* writes of "the sea of metaphors over which the reader is obliged to move in the roll of the poet's mind" (unsigned review, June 1836, 257-87. *SCH*, 367). Orestes Brownson comments in the *Boston Quarterly Review* that "his writings ... abound with varied imagery" which "is, for the most part, just and beautiful, but not unfrequently too abundant. Metaphor is sometimes piled upon metaphor and simile upon simile, until the mind is confused, bewildered, lost amidst the shining throng. In a few instances the thought seems to lie crushed and buried beneath the superabundance of illustration. Whole passages seem more like store-houses of imagery laid by for future use, than portions of a finished poem" (October 1841, 393-436. *SCH*, 385-86). More famously, in *Revaluation* F. R. Leavis criticises what he sees as an absence of precise meaning in "Ode to the West Wind" (171-74).

<sup>98</sup> Timothy Webb suggests that the general consensus on Shelley's gifts as a lyric poet, even amongst his critics, were often coded manifestations of "their own critical attitudes" which "found irritating" the poet's "fatal fluency" and "uncontrolled emotionalism." Webb suggests, too, that "for Shelley's admirers ... the lack of 'meaning' was a positive virtue," the poet "mov[ing] in a world of pure poetry, uncontaminated by realities, insulated from the harsh necessities of meaning." For Webb, as for myself, "the main result of this unholy alliance between those who despised Shelley and those who adored him was that, between the two extremes, the real Shelley was persistently neglected." Webb, 22-23.

<sup>99</sup> Gleckner, xii.

<sup>100</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Byron," *On Poetry and Poets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1957), 224.

is certainly a sense in which Shelley's poetry is peculiarly emotional, and when we try to define this sense we find ourselves invoking an absence of something."<sup>101</sup>

Though there have been critics, most notably Hogle,<sup>102</sup> who have married a focus on Shelley's perceived linguistic play with close and subtle analysis, this general attendance to proliferating imagery has led to a curious situation. Given that the works' complex poetic operations appear manifestly ripe for formalist analysis – in a way that, for example, Byron's longer works ostensibly are not (though this thesis has argued and will continue to argue otherwise in this regard) – and given that the existence of such complex operations in Shelley's works have been *noted* by many critics, we might feel there is a great store of close critical analysis of Shelley's works when in fact there is not; or, rather, there is no great store of close analysis which is not primarily concerned with identifying a particular line or passage in order to illustrate how it does *not* work rather than remaining open to how it *does*. There are certainly exceptions to this, such as the work of Michael O'Neill and William Keach, but there is something to be said for Keach's observation that "criticism of Shelley may be said to have gone beyond formalism without ever having been there,"<sup>103</sup> whereas with Byron it is more the case that critics have sometimes assumed that there would be little point in going there in the first place.

For both poets, these are imbalances which this thesis will redress. I would like to suggest that for each poet at times the texts' performative awareness of the nihilistic

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<sup>101</sup> Leavis, *Revaluation*, 173.

<sup>102</sup> Hogle, *passim*.

<sup>103</sup> Keach, xvii.

threat of the “figurality of all signification”<sup>104</sup> as a “series of substitutions”<sup>105</sup> with “nothing beneath”<sup>106</sup> serves, paradoxically, to hold that very threat in abeyance. In my recourse to the language of deconstructionism I do not suggest that the poets’ work is in some way proto-deconstructionist; rather, I would argue that a proto-deconstructionist awareness forms part of the works’ protean vitality, just as an awareness of the potential enervation of their language and all language is one of their works’ energising drives: that is to say, a key wellspring of the vitality, meaningfulness and significance of the individual text is its performative awareness that it is possible for it, and for texts in general, to possess none of these things.

There is an interconnectedness here between related delicately-held and mutually-enriching drives which are perhaps most clear in Shelley but are present in *Childe Harold* and take on a slightly different form in the middle cantos of *Don Juan*. In each poet’s work the poems attenuate stability and motion, fixity and flux, and express an openness to the multivalent, operating in ways which simultaneously speak of the interconnectedness of things whilst questioning things’ discrete substantiality. As this manifests itself in Shelley there is here a circle to be squared which has cast its influence on different critical assessments of Shelley: the question not of how things are related in the poet’s work but of the nature of relation itself as either ontologically concretising or essentially nihilistic; does interconnectedness augment or diminish the reality of that which is interconnected; do we perceive Shelley’s work as a search for a centre (perfectly or imperfectly-perceived) or as essentially endlessly decentring,

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<sup>104</sup> de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” 116.

<sup>105</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 211-24, 213.

<sup>106</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 147.

and how might we align this with Shelley's "divided intellectual inheritance,"<sup>107</sup> manifesting itself as a complex combination of idealism and scepticism. Relating to this, if we see Shelley's poetic practice as shaped by a "commitment to process, the condition of becoming,"<sup>108</sup> as Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill suggest, is this a searching with a particular, if darkly-perceived, end, a "secondary symptom of a ... belief in a non-Christian Presence, one ultimately unified within itself,"<sup>109</sup> as Hogle characterises the "dominant critical response,"<sup>110</sup> or is it, as Hogle himself sees it, a "centreless displacement of figural counterparts by one another"?<sup>111</sup>

By way of answer I wish to suggest that such ostensible dichotomies are essentially reconcilable, Shelley's poetry enacting a shifting and at times uneasy acknowledgement that the nature of things is indissolubly bound with that which they are not, that which they were and that which they will become in the moment of poetic operation. Part of this lies in a self-consciousness of language as both "the representation and the medium,"<sup>112</sup> the potential of the "arbitrary element in the alignment between meaning and linguistic articulation"<sup>113</sup> to enact an interplay of "speech creat[ing] thought"<sup>114</sup> (*PU* II. iv. 72) as well as *vice versa* which is mindful of both its generative capacity and the aforementioned concomitant threat of the "figurality of all signification," and it is this mindfulness which holds in abeyance such a dissolution and points towards a fundamentally affirming if uneasy and reflexively

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<sup>107</sup> Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park, PN: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997), 1.

<sup>108</sup> *SMW*, xv.

<sup>109</sup> Hogle, 7.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>112</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, *SMW*, 675.

<sup>113</sup> de Man, "Shelley Disfigured," 114.

<sup>114</sup> *Prometheus Unbound*, *SMW*, 273.

addressed “reconciliation of being and becoming.”<sup>115</sup> As this study shows, Byron also engages with language’s generative imperfections, with both poets aware of the affordances of judicious relinquishment to language; in Byron’s case this is sometimes employed as a device, particularly in terms of rhyme, happy phonological accident operating as Shakespearean Fool, allowing Byron a playfully not-quite-plausible deniability as part of his meaning-making. In so doing, Byron like Shelley enacts a broader movement within his work as each poet negotiates between positions of creative *vates* and Aeolian conduit, simultaneously ceding power to and wresting power from the poetic muse, the reality they depict, elements of influence, and language itself.

Acknowledging an engagement with the imperfections of signification is not, then, to accept Hogle’s characterisation of Shelley’s work as a “continuity of discontinuities”<sup>116</sup> nor to view the poems as a Derridean “series of substitution of centre for centre,”<sup>117</sup> Shelley ceding so much ground to a conception of writing as that which “ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it”<sup>118</sup> that we are left with nothing more than “air and fire” (to return to C. S. Lewis’ phrase). Hogle is not wrong in his call for the critic to “dethrone the centre-at-one-with-itself from the position of impetus in Shelley’s work,”<sup>119</sup> nor is it wrong to ascribe McFarland’s notion of the streaming infrashape greater relevance to the poets’ work than a fixed, ekphrastic conception. However, if in doing so we see their poetry as a “ceaseless transition between elements of thought”<sup>120</sup> which is a “rang[ing] over” of an endlessly decentred

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<sup>115</sup> Roberts, *Chaos of History*, 2.

<sup>116</sup> Jerrold E. Hogle, “Language and Form,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, 151.

<sup>117</sup> Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” 213.

<sup>118</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 142-48, 147.

<sup>119</sup> Hogle, 10.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

circumference with “nothing beneath,”<sup>121</sup> we fall short in our understanding of works which powerfully point towards, even if they variably achieve, a condition in which elements within the poem – including their status *as* uncomplicatedly discrete elements – are all held in a vitalising instability between the possibilities of being “at once the centre and circumference”<sup>122</sup> and neither of these things.

## V

This thesis is neither an influence nor a relationship study. Unlike prominent existing joint studies, my thesis takes as its point of comparison and contrast a particular shared aspect of their poetics. As such, the focus is less on dialogic interaction between the poets than on dialogic interaction within their individual poems as theatres of contention. Whereas existing joint studies take the form of dual biography,<sup>123</sup> a general exploration of influence, or assertions of similarity and difference, the nature of my point of comparison is such that it offers a nuancing of such asserted positions. Charles Robinson, taking his cue from the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* in focusing on comparisons of the “form” and “spirit” of the two poets,<sup>124</sup> contrasts Shelley’s “‘spirit’ of meliorism from that of Byron’s fatalism”<sup>125</sup> and points towards those “many ... poems ... written by the two poets to make this same distinction.”<sup>126</sup> My study, however, whilst acknowledging Shelley’s “more optimistic aesthetic”<sup>127</sup> in general terms, shows that in the workings of vital instability each poet offers complications to

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<sup>121</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 147.

<sup>122</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, SMW, 696.

<sup>123</sup> See Ian Gilmour, *The Making of the Poets: Byron and Shelley in Their Time* (London: Pimlico, 2003), which focuses on the poets in their childhood and early youth.

<sup>124</sup> Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 1-2.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.



such stated perspectives, as Chapters One, Two and Six in particular will show, with Chapter Two demonstrating that the “Byronic sense of frustration”<sup>128</sup> Robinson notes in Shelley’s later works is in evidence much earlier. William D. Brewer, who in *The Shelley-Byron Conversation* suggests a relationship “more collaborative than oppositional”<sup>129</sup> between poets whose “similarities are more significant than their differences,” is surely right to see “the contrasting outlooks of idealism and despair” as “limited perspectives” on poets who “deal with the human condition in a complex and ambivalent way.”<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, his is an influence study at heart, whilst my thesis differs in kind from the works of Gilmour, Robinson and Brewer: it is not a “Shelley-Byron conversation” so much as an exploration of performative Shelley-Shelley and Byron-Byron conversations, each elucidated with illuminating reference to the other. Further, the present study differs from earlier joint studies in its choice of texts for study, predicated as my choices are on their value in terms of the exploration of vital instability rather than their centrality to the Byron-Shelley relationship.<sup>131</sup>

Nor is my study an origin story with regard to vital instability in the work. There is, no doubt, a thesis to be written with such a focus: on an increasing concern with the nature of one’s own writing as the influence of patronage declines; on the vestigial influence of long-running debates on the consolations and restrictions of metre and rhyme; on the continuing but changing influence of Milton, a catalyst in that debate; on a renewal of urgency regarding poetry’s value, a debate which generates Peacock’s

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>129</sup> *The Shelley-Byron Conversation* (Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 1994), 3.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>131</sup> Neither Brewer nor Robinson write a great deal about the opening cantos of *Childe Harold* or the middle and later cantos of *Don Juan*, and of the Shelley poems to which this thesis attends, only *Prometheus Unbound* and, to a lesser extent, *Alastor*, are given significant attention by either critic.

“Four Ages of Poetry”<sup>132</sup> and Shelley’s *Defence* in turn; on how the ground of departure from Enlightenment thought was, for the younger Romantics, destabilised by the sediment of the first-generation Romantics; on how that sediment was itself overlaid by changing attitudes to, and indeed changes to, that first generation, who, certainly for Shelley, “cease[d] to be” (14)<sup>133</sup> that which they were; on how idealism, scepticism, cynicism, millenarianism, world-weariness and hope might be recalibrated for younger heads viewing the French Revolution through the prism of its aftermath. This, however, is not that thesis. My focus is on the product of this process; on what is happening in the texts, and whilst such considerations may underpin its textual explorations, the extent to which this thesis looks outward or backward is predicated upon what will most fruitfully serve that exploratory end.

What this thesis does contend is that there is something new to be said about the nature and operations of poetic instability in the poets’ work, and that this may be illuminated by considering the two poets together. In its choice of texts and organisation across chapters its aim is threefold: firstly, to elucidate the workings of vitalising instability in the poets’ work; secondly, to illuminate connections, contrasts and shades of operation between the poets’ engagements with instability; and thirdly, in relation to Byron in particular, to show a current of change in his approach to textual instability between his earlier work and his progression through *Don Juan*.

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<sup>132</sup> Thomas Love Peacock, “Four Ages of Poetry,” *Peacock’s Four Ages of Poetry; Shelley’s Defence of Poetry; Browning’s Essay on Shelley*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (1923. The Percy Reprints 3. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1929). Peacock’s essay questions the value of poetry, characterising the time as an “age of brass”; Shelley’s essay asserts poetry as, essentially, the source of value.

<sup>133</sup> *To Wordsworth*, *SMW*, 90-91. Shelley’s sonnet “deplore[s]” the “loss” (5-6) of the Wordsworth who, though still living, has “desert[ed]” his role as “weave[r] / [Of] songs consecrate to truth and liberty” and thus “cease[d] to be” (11-14), to Shelley, “as a lone star, whose light did shine / On some frail bark in winter’s midnight roar” (7-8).

Chapter organisation is loosely chronological, beginning with the earliest text, ending with the latest, and *Don Juan*'s martial cantos naturally precede discussion of the English cantos. However, chronological stringency has been consciously relaxed in relation to Shelley, again for three reasons. First, it has allowed me to bring together texts within chapters – the lyrics of Chapter Two, and *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion* in Chapter Four – which are mutually enlightening in relation to the workings of vitalising instability despite falling at different stages of the poet's career. Secondly, judicious placement of the Shelley chapters within the Byron chronology has allowed meaningful dialogue between the poets' forms of poetic making. Finally, I feel that whilst the operations of instability in Shelley varies in its localised manifestations within different texts, this variation cannot be easily ascribed to a neat chronological progression.

Chapter One explores the multiple ways in which mobility presents itself in the work of Byron, in so doing making the case for acceptance of the works' textual subtlety. McGann suggests that in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* "all the most basic lines of Byron's thinking, if not the conclusions of that thinking, are set in place,"<sup>134</sup> and what gives the cantos their life is that very inconclusiveness, the sense that the end of those lines of thought are still to be settled, even if I may quibble with the implication that Byron's thinking ever does form unambiguous and unequivocal conclusions. My decision to focus on these cantos (dismissed by Swinburne as having "little to remember or to praise" in them)<sup>135</sup> rather than the more regularly considered

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<sup>134</sup> *BMW*, xv.

<sup>135</sup> *Essays and Studies*, 1875, 238-58. *BCH*, 373-83, 378.

and more acclaimed later two cantos derives from my belief that the cantos offer a performative space in which the contention between the “mighty factions” of unfettered motion and trammelled fixity are more sharply realised: Byron’s vacillation is more pronounced, his touch less sure, such that they are paradoxically vitalised not by an effervescence of constant motion but by the contrary pulls of energised mobility and the retrograde stasis of melancholic enervation. I mentioned above Gleckner’s comments on the paucity of deep engagement with Byron’s poetic making; Gleckner notes in the same work that “most modern critics [of Byron] perpetuate the fashion of disdaining to comment on the poetry written prior to 1816, or dismissing it with appropriate condescension,”<sup>136</sup> and whilst the last half-century has gone some way to redress this imbalance there nevertheless remains space for a study offering detailed engagement with *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and the first two cantos in particular.

Chapter Two attends to the specific manifestations of mobility and instability in the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” “Mont Blanc” and “Ode to the West Wind” whilst also serving as illustrative exemplum of Shelley’s poetic operations and the thesis’ mode of incisive but outward-looking formalism. Jane Stabler suggests that Byron’s digressions “keep the reader aware of alternative routes so that a sense of indeterminacy is heightened even as a choice about interpretation is made,”<sup>137</sup> and such a maintaining of awareness of the poems’ possibilities to be otherwise is key to the reading of Shelley’s lyrics given in this chapter. Exploration of the lyrics brings to the fore Shelley’s engagement with states of difference and sameness which proves germane to the later analyses of Shelley within Chapters Four and Six, but also looks

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<sup>136</sup> Gleckner, xi.

<sup>137</sup> Stabler, 11.

directly forward to Chapter Three's focus on how instability manifests itself in and is made manifest by two key aspects of *Childe Harold's* opening cantos: representations of water and ruin. The function of ruin as presenting an unstable middle ground between fixity and flux, completion and formlessness, is in turn of relevance to the particular manifestation of difference and sameness explored in the image-making of Shelley's *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion* in Chapter Four, a chapter which also seeks to locate the poems' explorations of instability within the context of Shelley's wider oeuvre and germane elements of contemporary and historical scientific thought.

Image-making in Shelley involves levels of awareness, self-consciousness and engagement with the gaps between the representation and that which is being represented. For Byron in the middle cantos of *Don Juan* such concerns manifest themselves in a fascination with text-making.<sup>138</sup> By placing these chapters together I consider connections between both poets' compulsions to interrogate the process of poetic making through an exploration of sameness and difference. In the second half of Chapter Five I show how Byron's text-making involves a reconsideration of the consolations of motion and stability and indeed of the power of poetic expression; as he moves into the English cantos his epic seeks increasing recourse to forms of non-articulation as a means of addressing the possibility that mobility does not cheat so well as, earlier in his epic, it was famed to do. By placing Chapter Six, which focuses on *Prometheus Unbound*, between my exploration of the middle cantos and the English cantos of *Don Juan* I aim to show the extent to which Shelley, too, seeks recourse to modes of non-articulation as he addresses the extraordinary challenges of

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<sup>138</sup> Whilst my own explorations take a slightly different form, I am indebted to the work of Frederick Garber for his analysis of the implications of text and self in Byron's work. *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988). Hereafter, Garber.

his vision in a lyrical drama which, this study contends, is an enactment of the poem's relation with the very concept of relation. The final chapter offers a new reading of Byron's English cantos – which are still, as Peter Graham noted nearly thirty years ago, “more admired than studied”<sup>139</sup> – which explores this movement into non-articulation as the two poets offer differing responses to their shared awareness of what linguistic articulation can and cannot achieve.

In exploring these texts this thesis seeks to show that the performative space of the poem for both poets enacts an ongoing negotiation between the poetic corollaries of potential sources of meaninglessness: on the one hand the fixed poetic product devoid of mobility, and on the other the endlessly mobile text, either that which is engaged in an endless dance of signification or that which remains unmade, unarticulated and unformed. In different ways the chosen poems are performative explorations of themselves and their own potential for meaninglessness, negotiating a course between the twin possibilities of calcification and forms, or unforms, of non-articulation. These are texts in which poesy's wings are neither viewless nor sprawling on a pin but are aware that they hold the possibility of being either and both: much of the poems' meanings lie in their performative awareness of the potential meaninglessness of all instances of linguistic articulation, including their own.

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<sup>139</sup> Peter W. Graham, *Don Juan and Regency England* (London: UP of Virginia, 1990), 158. Hereafter, Graham.

## CHAPTER ONE

### “From Change to Change We Run”:

#### Mobility in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos I and II

## I

Nine months before the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Byron writes that he conceives the work as “a poem on Ariosto’s plan, that is to say, on *no plan* at all.”<sup>1</sup> Given this avowal, the Spenserian stanza – complex, stately, regimented in rhyme and meter and endowed with the compartmentalising propensities of its closing couplet and the resolution of that final alexandrine – seems an unnatural choice. What we find is a poet seeking to push the boundaries of the form just as he will later do with the *ottava rima* of *Don Juan*.<sup>2</sup> The sometimes vitalising, sometimes poignantly enervating deviations involve manipulation of the Spenserian stanza itself, and his movements to other forms.<sup>3</sup>

The presence of digressive stanzas – poems, or representations of songs, within the poem – may not seem particularly noteworthy: this is, after all, a work of scope and depth, indebted to topographical poetry and including extensive notes by Byron and Hobhouse; it is “both a travel poem (and hence a medley of narrative and description)

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to William Miller, 30 July 1811, *BLJ*, vol. ii, 63.

<sup>2</sup> Swinburne, acerbically critical of Byron elsewhere, writes that “the *ottava rima* he has fairly conquered and wrested” from its Italian origins. *Essays and Studies*, 1875, 238-58. *BCH*, 373-83, 380.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Jeffrey notes that “the versification is in the stanza of Spencer [*sic*]; and none of all the imitators of that venerable bard have availed themselves more extensively of the great range of tones and manners in which his example entitles them to indulge. Not satisfied even with this license of variety, he has passed at will, and entirely, from the style of Spencer, to that of his own age,” *Edinburgh Review*, May 1812, *BCH*, 38-42, 40-41.

and a kind of unepical modern epic,”<sup>4</sup> an amalgam of forms and modes which speak to each other in significant ways. Yet two observations might be made: firstly, *Don Juan*, that most digressive of texts, tests and tests again the malleability of the *ottava rima* across more than sixteen cantos with only two periods of deviation;<sup>5</sup> and secondly, in the preface to *Childe Harold* Byron justifies his verse form as one which “according to one of our most successful poets, admits of every variety,” and spends a substantial paragraph elaborating the point.<sup>6</sup> Given this, it is striking that it takes the poet only thirteen stanzas to break free of the form – and it is, very much, a breaking free:

But when the sun was sinking in the sea  
 He seiz'd his harp, which he at times could string,  
 And strike, albeit with untaught melody,  
 When deem'd he no strange ear was listening:  
 And now his fingers o'er it he did fling,  
 And tun'd his farewell in the dim twilight.  
 While flew the vessel on her snowy wing,  
 And fleeting shores receded from his sight,  
 Thus to the elements he pour'd his last 'Good night'.  
(I. 13: 100-108)<sup>7</sup>

Near the canto's close, the *Childe* is again moved towards song in the form of the lines “To Inez”:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gleckner, 51.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter Seven for an exploration of the second of these deviations, the song of the “Black Friar.”

<sup>6</sup> Byron quotes James Beattie: “Not long ago I began a poem in the style and stanza of Spenser, in which I propose to give full scope to my inclination, and be either droll or pathetic, descriptive or sentimental, tender or satirical, as the humour strikes me; for, if I mistake not, the measure which I have adopted admits equally of all these kinds of composition.” Byron adds: “Strengthened in my opinion by such authority, and by the example of some of the highest order of Italian poets, I shall make no apology for attempts at similar variations in the following composition; satisfied that, if they are unsuccessful, their failure must be in the execution, rather than in the design sanctioned by the practice of Ariosto, Thomson, and Beattie,” *BMW*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Parenthetical canto, stanza and line numbers in this chapter refer to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Most likely addressed to Teresa Macri.



Nought that he saw his sadness could abate:  
Yet once he struggled 'gainst the demon's sway,  
And as in Beauty's bower he pensive sate,  
Pour'd forth this unpremeditated lay,  
To charms as fair as those that sooth'd his happier day.  
(I. 84: 832-36)

In both instances Byron emphasises the act's spontaneity, the one "with untaught melody," the other "unpremeditated"; in the first he "seiz[es]" his instrument and "strike[s]" it, "fling[ing]" "his fingers o'er it"; in both cases the song is "pour'd," evoking the unstructured recklessness of water, which in the first song is continued in the exultant discordance of "The Night-winds sigh, the breakers roar, / And shrieks the wild seamew" (I. "last 'Good night'" 1: 120-21). We have a singer brought low by melancholy and feeling the relief of escape into song, but we feel too a poet revelling in a similar freedom: particularly in the first song there is a relieved "Adieu! Adieu!" (I. "last 'Good night'" 1: 118) from the trammels of complex form into something simpler, as he "intermingle[s] ... lyrical pieces with the solemn stanza of his general measure."<sup>9</sup> His poetic journey, putatively one of liberation, restricts him almost as soon as it begins.

In each song tone, subject matter and language reflect the Spenserian lines which precede them; in the "last 'Good night'," "when the sun was sinking in the sea" becomes "Yon Sun that sets upon the sea" (I. "last 'Good night'" 1: 122), "fleeting shores" and "fast the white rocks faded from his view" (I. 12: 102) become "my native

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, May 1812, *BCH*, 38-42, 41.

shore / Fades o'er the waters blue" (I. "last 'Good night'" 1: 119-20); in "To Inez," "life-abhorring gloom / Wrote on his faded brow curst Cain's unresting doom" (I. 83: 826-27) becomes "smile not at my sullen brow" and "It is that settled, ceaseless gloom / The fabled Hebrew wanderer bore" (I. "To Inez" 1: 837; 5: 853-54). The songs' function for the Childe within the narrative and for the poet with regard to his narrative is the same: each embarks upon a journey in an attempt to escape the strictures around him, the one out to sea, the other into the anticipated freedom of his verse, which he hopes will, as it did for "Dr Beattie," "give full scope to his inclination," and each finds these attempts at escape unsuccessful, because:

What Exile from himself can flee?  
 To Zones, though more and more remote,  
 Still, still pursues, where-e'er I be,  
 The blight of life—the demon, Thought.  
(I. "To Inez" 6: 857-60)

Consequently, they seek a further shift into song, "the progressive continuity of narrative ... constantly collapsing into the dilatory mode."<sup>10</sup> The journey in the poem of the Childe, and the journey of the poem for the poet, are more than anything a flight from "Consciousness awaking to her woes" (I. 92: 941) – the key to Byron's movement and forward drive here,<sup>11</sup> which in turn has engendered his pilgrim avatar – and the poems within the poem are a response to the journeys' early failures to quell that consciousness. Indeed, in his movement to the anticipated freedom of "Zones" we might feel a nod to the word's multivalence as a symbol of restriction, as with the

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<sup>10</sup> Gleckner, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome McGann cites this line as "the explicit theme of cantos I and II," *BMW*, 1028.

“fragrant zone” (18) of Keats’ “La Belle Dame sans Merci.”<sup>12</sup> The final stanza of his “last ‘Good night’” is as evocative of the poet’s attitude to poetic making as it is of the Childe’s state of mind, and the avowal of a relinquishment of agency makes the choice of harp as instrument, with its Aeolian connotations, an appropriate one:

With thee, my bark, I’ll swiftly go  
Athwart the foaming brine;  
Nor care what land thou bear’st me to,  
So not again to mine.

(I. “last ‘Good night’” 10: 190-94)

The stanza preceding the song emphasises that this shift towards “untaught” and spontaneous “pour[ing]” of song may be “unpremeditated” but it is not unprecedented: it is what the Childe “at times could” do “when deem’d he no strange ear was listening.” It is a shift to the play of verse in retreat from “the demon, Thought,” both particular melancholy thoughts and an overly thoughtful, overly conscious poetic making, and, as a point of contact in the “relationship between the poem-being-constructed and the self-that-constructs,” as Michael O’Neill says in his discussion of Romantic self-consciousness,<sup>13</sup> it is a shift welcomed as much by Byron as by the Childe.

The songs are expressions of Byron’s movement towards change, and the lines “To Inez” in particular express, too, its failure. The melancholy with which the canto begins has only increased by its close. Where, in Byron’s poem “To Ianthe” in his

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<sup>12</sup> *KMW*, 273-4, 273.

<sup>13</sup> *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, xvi.

“Addition to the Preface,”<sup>14</sup> the “eye” had “dazzle[d]” (“To Ianthe” 4: 28-30),<sup>15</sup> with Inez the poet proclaims that “thine eyes have scarce a charm for me” (I. “To Inez” 4: 852). The songs represent a further failure in that, in espousing his rudderlessness, he evokes his poetic forbears: in situation, form and language (“And now I’m in the world alone / Upon the wide, wide sea” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 9: 182-83)) we feel the shadow of Coleridge’s mariner in the first song,<sup>16</sup> and as “To Inez” ends we feel *King Lear*’s Edgar in “I’ve known the worst. // What is that worst? Nay do not ask” (I. “To Inez” 8-9: 868-69).<sup>17</sup> In ways which have corollaries in the operations of Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*,<sup>18</sup> freedom is here expressed in ways which give the lie to that freedom.

Following the first song, there is an attempt to ride the momentum he has built, with “On, on the vessel flies, the land is gone” (I. 14: 198). As “To Inez” ends, though, it has served only to feed melancholia: the poet says “Adieu” to “fair Cadiz” and asks “Who may forget how well thy walls have stood?” (I. 85: 873-74). Chapter Three will demonstrate how rare such unequivocal expressions of fixity are: set against a pervasive destabilisation of the concrete, these fixed walls take on a greater resonance, and what they are resonant of is failure.

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<sup>14</sup> The stanzas “To Ianthe” were added to the poem in the seventh edition (1814), though written earlier. They are addressed to Lady Charlotte Harley, daughter of Lady Oxford.

<sup>15</sup> *BMW*, 21-22, 22.

<sup>16</sup> “Alone, alone, all all alone / Alone on the wide wide Sea” (224-25). Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere,” William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1802*, ed., introd. and notes Fiona Stafford (Oxford World’s Classics: Oxford UP, 2013), 5-24, 11.

<sup>17</sup> “EDGAR [*aside*]: O gods! Who is’t can say ‘I am the worst’? / I am worse than e’er I was. ... / And worse I may be yet; the worst is not / So long as we can say ‘This is the worst’” (IV. i. 27-30). William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Ed. R. A. Foakes. The Arden Shakespeare, 3<sup>rd</sup> Revised Edition (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997), 305-306.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter Six for a discussion of Shelley’s engagement with poetic influence in his lyrical drama.

The movement back from the third song, the “half s[u]ng, half scream’d” (II. 72: 648) “uncouth dirge” of the “kirtled clan” (II. 71: 639) in canto II, suggests that the desire for change which engendered the song has not been sated, with “Hereditary bondsmen!” (II. 76: 720) following “Spirit of freedom!” (II. 74: 702) following “Fair Greece!” (II. 73: 693): three apostrophes within four stanzas. We have a concentration of Byron’s characteristic digressive flights, exemplified most clearly by “sweet was the scene, yet soon he thought to flee, / More restless than the swallow in the skies,” afflicted by “Meditation” and “conscious Reason” which are characterised as pernicious external agents, the one “fix[ing] at times on him,” the other “whisper[ing] to despise / His early youth” (I. 27: 317-21). We find in the alexandrine that “as he gaz’d on truth his aching eyes grew dim” (I. 27: 323), and the response – which, as with the movement to song, we feel is Byron’s response to the tangles of contemplation as much as the Childe’s – is an urgent “To horse! To horse! he quits, for ever quits / A scene of peace, though soothing to his soul” (I. 28: 324-25). The explorations of “the demon, Thought,” of “Consciousness awaking to her woes” are, to Byron and to the Childe, “moping fits” from which they must be “rouse[d]” by endless motion (I. 28: 326):

Onward he flies, nor fix’d as yet the goal  
 Where he shall rest him on his pilgrimage;  
 And o’er him many changing scenes must roll  
 Ere toil his thirst for travel can assuage.  
(I, 28: 328-31)

Nine stanzas later, Byron gives a call to arms: “Awake, ye sons of Spain! awake! advance!” (I. 37: 405). Here, the preceding stanza contemplates contemporary Spain’s fallen state and asks “Teems not each ditty with the glorious tale?” (I. 36: 396). The specific focus gives way to a more generalised meditation upon poetry and posterity, lamenting that “Ah! such, alas! the hero’s amplest fate! / When granite moulders and when records fail, / A peasant’s plaint prolongs his dubious date” (I. 36: 397-99). Byron’s exploration is equivocal, valorising the power of “Tradition’s simple tongue” (I. 36: 403) above the “Volume, Pillar, Pile” (I. 36: 402), yet speaking of diminution too: “Pride! Bend thine eye from heaven to thine estate; / See how the Mighty shrink into a song!” (I. 36: 400-401) is surely the message of Shelley’s “traveller from an antique land” (1), with the “peasant’s plaint” Byron’s artistic equivalent of the “vast and trunkless legs of stone” (2).<sup>19</sup> Poetry’s position here is as last record, but also as inadequate one, one which seeks to resurrect the glory of the past but only serves to remind us what is lost. In his call to the “sons of Spain” to “awake,” the flight to rousing patriotism is only in part a response to the country’s malaise: it is the poet’s response to “the demon Thought,” his “Consciousness” of his own role as recorder of lost glories “awaking to [its] woes,” feeling the weight of responsibility, and the potential futility of his poetic pilgrimage.

Similarly, the apostrophe to “Albuera! glorious field of grief!” (I. 43: 459) concludes: “Till others fall where other chieftans lead / Thy name shall circle round the gaping throng, / And shine in worthless lays, the theme of transient song!” (I. 43: 465-67). After disparaging fame, posterity, and the “worthless lays” which perpetuate them we

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<sup>19</sup> “Ozymandias,” *SMW*, 198.

have an abrupt “Enough of Battle’s minions!” (I. 44: 468), followed by “Full swiftly Harold wends his lonely way” (I. 45: 477). An extended apostrophe to Parnassus (I. 60-64: 612-657) is again beset by musings on the poet’s capacity to record for posterity.<sup>20</sup> Byron attaches great importance to his physical presence at places more often seen “in the phrenzy of a dreamer’s eye” or “in the fabled landscape of a lay” (I. 60: 613-14),<sup>21</sup> and it is clear that readers valued this in his work.<sup>22</sup> Here, however, the pressure of the verisimilitude he feels this should accord him weighs heavily, occasioning the abrupt “Of thee hereafter” (I. 63: 639), an attempt to turn abruptly aside which proves abortive, the poet immediately returning self-reflexively to his decision to “turn ... aside” “ev’n amidst [his] strain” (I. 63: 639-40), before another determined proclamation, this time of “Now to my theme” (I. 63: 644), before delaying again with an immediate “but ...” (I. 64: 648). Too much contemplation, particularly regarding the limits of poetry in conveying the “measured and living *truth*”<sup>23</sup> he seeks to present, leads to abrupt shifts in focus, a retreat into motion.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Cronin suggests that whilst Harold travels “to assuage his own ennui,” for the poet the journey is a “quest for an authentic poetry” involving “visit[ing] the holy places of his craft,” with Parnassus as “his ultimate goal.” *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 130. I do not disagree on either count, but would add that it is possible for the quest for an authentic poetry, expressed in the journey in and the journey of the poem, to be no less heartfelt for itself being occasioned by a need to assuage ennui, and no less significant for the fact that it may prove neither panacea nor, ultimately, effective palliative.

<sup>21</sup> Keats, in a letter of 20 September 1819 to George and Georgiana Keats, writes: “You speak of Lord Byron and me—There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—Mine is the hardest task. You see the immense difference,” *KMW*, 508. Whether or not we agree, it is clear that Byron takes describing what he sees seriously. The line from Horace which serves as epigraph to *Don Juan* – *difficile est proprie communia dicere* – had previously been translated by Byron as: “Whate’er the critic says or poet sings, / ’Tis no slight task to write on common things,” *BMW*, 373.

<sup>22</sup> John Ruskin writes effusively of his early encounters with Byron’s work that “here at last I had found a man who spoke only of what he had seen, and known.” John Ruskin, *Praeterita: Outlines of Scenes and Thoughts Perhaps Worthy of Memory in My Past Life* (1885-9), in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. 39 vols (George Allen: 1903-12), vol. xxxv, 148.

<sup>23</sup> “The thing wholly new and precious to me in Byron was his measured and living *truth*—measured, as compared with Homer; and living, as compared with everybody else,” *ibid.*, 148.

In canto II melancholic consciousness again snares itself as assiduously as the depressive mind is wont to do, conscious reason offering no escape, the journey back too steep, too carefully blocked. Consequently, there are only two things to be done: to fling the thoughts from the mind, and to get moving:

‘Tis an old lesson; Time approves it true,  
And those who know it best, deplore it most;  
When all is won that all desire to woo,  
The paltry prize is hardly worth the cost:  
Youth wasted, minds degraded, honour lost,  
These are thy fruits, successful Passion! these!  
Still to the last it rankles, a disease,  
Not to be cur’d when Love itself forgets to please.

Away! nor let me loiter in my song,  
For we have many a mountain-path to tread,  
And many a varied shore to sail along  
(II. 35-36: 307-318)

In both sentiment and response, we will see this played out famously elsewhere, a decade later:

The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee ...  
(23-31)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale,” *KMW*, 285-88, 286.



Where Keats takes consolation, however equivocally, in “the viewless wings of Poesy” (33),<sup>25</sup> for Byron it is the song’s ongoing motion of “many a ... path” and “many a varied shore” more than the song *per se* which offers potential consolation: a “song” in which one “loiter[s]” is of no use to Byron. He will be led “by pensive Sadness, not by Fiction” (II. 36: 319), and in his almost immediate reference to the “little schemes of thought” of the “mortal head” (II. 36: 320-21) we see his continuing consciousness of the retrograde pulls of consciousness itself. The implied pejorative here surely extends beyond the diminutive adjective, with “schemes” allied with “system,” that particular target for Byronic opprobrium.<sup>26</sup> Byron’s poetic making shares with Shelley’s the tension of a self-defeating propensity in the bones of the creative act in which the vitality of process is ever likely to result in the deadened fixity of poetic product; for Byron, the vehicle chosen to escape the “little schemes of thought” is the potential restriction of another “system” – that of the poetic form – and the conflict vitalises the work.

Byron’s most striking formal decision is the run-on stanza, with the alexandrine of Spenserian verse providing a resolution and sense of finality which makes the run-on stanza more formally transgressive than with the *ottava rima* of *Don Juan*. By canto IV a full third of the stanzas share a sentence with the stanzas around them, sometimes

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Byron writes to John Murray on 15 September 1817 that “With regard to poetry in general I am convinced the more I think of it – that ... *all* of us – Scott – Southey – Wordsworth – Moore – Campbell – are all in the wrong – one as much as another – that we are upon a wrong revolutionary political system – systems – not worth a damn in itself,” *BLJ*, vol. v, 265. It seems that it is “system” itself that is anathema to Byron as much as any *particular* system. He writes to Leigh Hunt: “I have not time nor paper to *attack* your *system* – which ought to be done – were it only because it is a *system*,” *BLJ*, vol. iv, 332. In a letter to Thomas Moore he says: “[Hunt] answer[ed] ... that his style was a system, or *upon system*, or some such cant; and, when a man talks of systems, his case his hopeless,” *BLJ*, vol. vi, 46.

with pure unpunctuated enjambment; in cantos I and II Byron is more tentative in both the regularity of the transgression and the softness or absence of punctuation, and consequently particular instances prove more telling. The first stanzas whose boundaries are subject to a mobility in their formal delineation are concerned with the delineation of national borders, with “what bounds the rival realms divide” (I. 32: 361), and the contrasting mobility of the liminal “silver streamlet,” a “brook” with “scarce a name” to “distinguish” it, “though rival kingdoms press its verdant sides” (I. 33: 369-71). Thus “mingling bounds” (I. 34: 378) are formally mirrored in mingling stanzaic bounds.

The breaking of stanzaic boundaries operates in ways beyond just punctuation, Byron displaying a subtlety of effect in end-stopped lines which exploits the semiotic potential of rhyme:

Red gleam'd the cross, and wan'd the crescent pale,  
While Afric's echoes thrill'd with Moorish matrons' wail.

Teems not each ditty with the glorious tale?  
Ah! such, alas, the hero's amplest fate!  
When granite moulders and when records fail,  
A peasant's plaint prolongs his dubious date.  
Pride! bend thine eye from heaven to thine estate,  
See how the Mighty shrink into a song!  
(I. 35-36: 394-401)

Here, the combined summative potential of the form's final couplet and the alexandrine's expansiveness is undermined by the continuation of the 'C' rhyme from one stanza into the nominal 'A' rhyme of the next. The repeated rhyme turns the

alexandrine into the first line of an elegiac couplet which perfectly conveys what a bathetic falling off was there; consequently we are ready to accept the emotional force of “see how the Mighty shrink into a song!” not only because of the triteness implied by “ditty” but because we have seen just that – a shrinking into a diminished, less expansive form – five lines earlier. As Jerome McGann notes, Byron’s “choice of Spenserian stanza was regulative – he took its traditions as a sanction for tonal and structural flexibility,” on the basis that “form adds a template or touchstone to tradition, and with that touchstone he feels safe to indulge in freedom within those bounds.”<sup>27</sup> We see repeatedly in both poets Susan Wolfson’s observation that, in Romantic poetics, “formal elements do not exist ‘apart’ from but play a part in the semantic order, ... signify[ing] as much as, and as part of, words themselves.”<sup>28</sup>

## II

For Byron the Spenserian stanza provides an involved seat of action whose catalysing force lies in its potential to limit and the potential that it may not.<sup>29</sup> Form may preclude as much as permit: like the “rippling waves” of the “silver streamlet” dividing “rival realms,” poetic form’s operations in relation to that which it contains and that which it denies are meaningful. Angela Leighton, taking up Picasso’s rumination on “what is outside or what is inside a form,” argues that “form is both a container and a deflector. Imagined visually, it looks two ways: to the shape it keeps in and the shape

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<sup>27</sup> *BCPW*, vol. ii, 270.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> As a postscript to Lord Holland concerning the poet’s House of Lords speech on the Frame Work Bill, Byron states that he is “a little apprehensive that your Lordship will think me ... *half a framebreaker myself*,” *BCMP*, 282. Transposing the description to his poetic making, both the breaking and its partialness stand together as an appropriate representation of the poet’s approach to form.

it keeps out.”<sup>30</sup> The form of Byron’s “strain” imperfectly constrains that which is within and imperfectly restrains that which is without, and in doing so it is energised and made mobile. As when Byron writes, in the closing stanzas of canto I, “And thou, my friend! – since unavailing woe / Burst from my heart, and mingles with the strain” (I. 91: 927-28),<sup>31</sup> it is when the poem’s bounds are challenged, broken, and made mobile that they are most meaningful, and in discussing what is pressing with mobile energy against the bounds of the text we should acknowledge that Byron’s statement that *Childe Harold* was conceived “on *no plan* at all” must, as Timothy Webb argues, be “applie[d] not only to the poem but to many of its notes and to the poem’s relation to the notes.”<sup>32</sup> As Jane Stabler notes, digression in Byron “cannot [be] fully underst[ood] ... if we confine our notion of digression simply to conversational deviation from the plot.”<sup>33</sup>

Arguably, Byron’s notes are at once exacerbating and ameliorative in relation to textual mobility: they make it more and less straightforward, in different regards. If, as modern readers, we hold in check the beguiling temptation to view the text through the prism of the cult of Byron and the mercurial figure we sense at the helm of *Don Juan*, the notes within *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* may persuade us to see the work more readily as an earnestly-undertaken attempt at travelogue. In so doing, the *Childe* in turn may more readily be seen as the “fictitious character ... introduced for the sake

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<sup>30</sup> Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 15-16.

<sup>31</sup> Byron’s note points the reader towards John Wingfield, “who died of a fever at Coimbra” (*BMW*, 84); similarly, early in canto II Byron vitalisingly fails to “keep out” his grief for John Edleston (II. 9: 73-81), as Chapter Three explores.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Webb, “*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*: Annotating the Second Canto,” *The Byron Journal* 41.2 (2013): 127-143 (139).

<sup>33</sup> Stabler, 3.

of giving some connexion to the piece” which Byron avows him to be,<sup>34</sup> transmuted into an avatar of the poet’s own psyche just as the poem is transmuted into “a radical transformation of the ... topographical poem” in which “Byron interiorizes the form so drastically that it mutates into a drama of personal history.”<sup>35</sup> Reading the preface as a solemnly-meant pretension to public record gives the text’s internal operations an altogether more poignant cast: in the movement between poem and notes we see a doubt-filled but sincere desire to bear accurate witness.

The text operates vitalisingly as both a part-permeable and part-malleable framework and a dialogic network, the notes forming one of the many ways in which “Byron’s digressions comprehend multiple challenges to a placid readerly experience.”<sup>36</sup> Byron self-reflexively comments that he “cannot resist availing [him]self of the permission of [his] friend Dr Clarke ... to insert [an] extract from a letter of his to me, as a note to the above lines” in order to “add tenfold weight to [Byron’s] testimony” on the controversy surrounding the Elgin marbles.<sup>37</sup> A few stanzas earlier the poet’s depth of feeling in his depiction of Athens is heightened by the length and tone of his notes: when he writes of the Parthenon that “even gods must yield – religions take their turn: / ’Twas Jove’s – ’tis Mahomet’s – and other creeds / Will rise with other years” (II. 3: 23-25), the attendant note is both a prose rendering of the poeticised argument and an impassioned piece, in its way as poetic as the verse itself and complete with Shakespearean quotation.<sup>38</sup> Its asterisk lies two stanzas earlier (II. 1: 6), such that either the verse will be read as a recapitulation of the note’s argument rather than vice

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<sup>34</sup> Preface to the first two cantos, *BMW*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> McGann, *BMW*, 1026.

<sup>36</sup> Stabler, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Note to II. 12: 107, *BMW*, 86.

<sup>38</sup> Note to II. 1: 6, *BMW*, 85.

versa, or the reader will negotiate the “somewhat hesitant ‘bundling’” D. C. Greetham suggests in his discussion of how textual presentation affects text consumption,<sup>39</sup> reading to the end of a stanza or several stanzas before accessing the notes or, if not, reading in such a way that the drive of the metre is continually interrupted – in any case navigating a route which continually deconstructs and reconstructs the text as poem, leaving it ever hovering between historical record and fictionalised account. In the Elgin marbles description, the reader is pointed towards two extensive and emotive notes within one emotive stanza sequence (II. 1: 6; 5: 38).

Anthony Grafton argues that “footnotes buttress and undermine, at one and the same time” the stability of a text;<sup>40</sup> Greetham that “every time a note alerts the reader to a possibly ambiguous moment, the alterity of the text is reinforced as well as overcome.”<sup>41</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer goes further, contending that, in texts whose complexities mean that “we are still trying various ways of organizing what we see or hesitating between them ... we don’t ... see what is there,” and thus such a text cannot “be a work of literary art for us.”<sup>42</sup> The existence of the extrapoetic material simultaneously supports *Childe Harold*’s integrity as attempt to bear witness and draws our attention to its constructedness and its nature as a work engaged in a dialectic with its own genesis.

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<sup>39</sup> D. C. Greetham, *Theories of the Text* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1999), 314.

<sup>40</sup> Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London: Faber, 1997), 32.

<sup>41</sup> Greetham, *Theories of the Text*, 95.

<sup>42</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 79.

Byron's prefatory material offers a further example of the poem's self-questioning capacity. As with prefaces, epigraphs by their nature occupy a liminal space, both part of and apart from the text with which (*in* which?) they are placed, denoting the text as fiction even as they contribute to that fiction, adding to the world of the text even as they form a bridge between that world and the world outside it. However, Byron's choice of epigraph – from Louis-Charles Fougeret de Monbron's *Le Cosmopolite ou le Citoyen du monde* – mirrors the destabilising mobility of its text in a more particular way.<sup>43</sup>

The epigraph begins: "*L'univers est une espèce de livre, dont on n'a lu que la première page quand on n'a vu que son pays. J'en ai feuilleté un assez grand nombre, que j'ai trouvé également mauvaises.*"<sup>44</sup> In tone (world-weary disillusionment), theme (travel) and in the explicit linking of art and reality ("*livre*" and "*l'univers*"), it forms an appropriate opening to the cantos. More than this, though, it displays both a self-acknowledged associative imperfection and a destabilising of the hierarchical relations inherent in figurative language. "*Espèce de*" holds the twin, contradictory connotations inherent in the nature of simile and analogy: both the similarity between and the inherent separateness of the two elements are pointed up. As we will see in the poetry of Shelley, the works' life derives in part from a sense of both the tenuousness and the tenacity of association, the connections forged in spite of the potential for dissolution and the dissolution begun in spite of the strength of connection.

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter Seven for discussion of a similar exacerbation of existing liminality in Don Juan's encounters with the 'Black Friar'.

<sup>44</sup> "The universe is a kind of book of which you have read but one page when you have seen only your own country. I have leafed through a sufficient number to have found them equally bad," *BMW*, 19.

Instability is a hair-line fracture in the bones of all analogy; here, though, there is a destabilisation of the implicit hierarchies which ordinarily surround figurative associations. Having posited the analogy between “*l’univers*” and “*livre*,” and between their respective constituents of “*pays*” and “*page*,” in the ensuing extension of the analogy Monbron’s use of the verb “*feuilleter*” (“leaf through”) surely adheres itself more clearly to the act of reading than the act of travelling. Shelley at times “reverses the usual figurative function of imagery and makes a mental state or operation the vehicle in a figure whose tenor is sensory and physical”;<sup>45</sup> indeed, Shelley notes this himself in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*.<sup>46</sup> However, whilst Shelley in such instances reverses the usual constituent elements of vehicle and tenor, such a reversal does not necessarily destabilise the analogical operation in and of itself; in Byron, we find at times a similar audacity in the ascription of vehicle and tenor, but also, as here, a shift in vehicle and tenor which operates within the enactment of the analogy: the destabilisation is performative in nature, happening in the analogy’s unfolding.

For figurative language to take on a life of its own in this way, for the tenor’s primacy to be at least challenged by its vehicle, is a metadialectic which in its operations possesses its own semiotic potential. This kind of semiosis of analogic operation (rather than the more accepted semiosis of any particular analogy itself) manifests itself in different forms in both our poets: in Shelley we see it in the “tenuously

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<sup>45</sup> Keach, 45. Keach cites the lines “her way was paved, and roofed above / With flowers as soft of thoughts of budding love” (327-28) from *Epipsychidion*.

<sup>46</sup> “The imagery which I have employed will be found, in many instances, to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed,” *SMW*, 230.



connected profusion”<sup>47</sup> of similes in poems such as “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” whose very profusion is, as I shall explore in Chapter Two, meaning-making; in Byron, it forms one facet of a wider tendency towards hierarchical destabilisation which often takes surprising directions.

### III

Byron’s particular use of infinitive and deictic constructions also operate to deny the potential fixity of stability. In canto II we find within one stanza lines beginning “to sit,” “to slowly trace” and “to climb” (II. 25: 217-18; 221), and in the next the line, “to hear, to see, to feel, and to possess” (II. 26: 227); at the canto’s close, as the poet seeks “full reckless” motion (II. 98: 924), we have “to leave,” “to feign” and “to view” (II. 97-8: 913; 915; 920). Byron often keeps his verbs resolutely infinitive, as if the ascribing of a particular instance to abstract action would be a fixity too far; as if he hopes to keep all motion, all action.

Similarly, the poem often seeks refuge in a deixis which wrests the poem from the clutches of finality, rendering it ever art-in-process rather than accomplished artefact. In so doing, we wonder whether Byron might wish to take issue with, or offer an important caveat and corollary to, Gadamer’s aforementioned contention: whilst it may be that if “we are still trying various ways of organizing what we see” then the text cannot “be a work of literary art for us,” Byron’s work displays a heightened awareness of the possibility that the fully “organiz[ed]” and fixed text – a text in which

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<sup>47</sup> Bloom, 37.

the delineative potential of form and meaning alike are honoured more in the observance than the breach – may itself also be constitutive of a deadened state which is “not a work of literary art.”

Whilst the deictic trope, conventionally used, affords immediacy and vitality – “There some grave Moslem to devotion stoops / ... Here the Albanian proudly treads the ground” (II. 59: 525-27) – Byron often employs deixis for jolting self-reflexive effect, such as the “And be alone on earth, as I am now” (II. 98: 921) at the conclusion of canto II. Here, as elsewhere,<sup>48</sup> Byron ameliorates the text’s fixity, the poem rearing up in a refusal to consign itself to completion. As I noted in the Introduction to this study, there is value in Jerome McGann’s observation that often “we seem to be with Byron while he is actually spinning his lines,”<sup>49</sup> and Gavin Hopps is right to observe Byron’s ability to create at times in these cantos a sense of “a temporality coextensive with the moment of speaking”:<sup>50</sup> here and in *Don Juan*, Byron presents the poems as texts in which *that which is created* maintains its *creating*, pressing a range of effects into the service of this generative and mobile principle.

The infinitive and the deictic speak of the world rather than of the static constructed text; in the example of the verb “*feuilleter*” we saw the verb adhere more comfortably to the vehicle (literary art) than the tenor (the world). Often operating alongside these infinitive and deictic constructions, the destabilisation noted in conventional

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<sup>48</sup> Byron employs this device throughout his career. Note the playful “Lines to Mr Hodgson” from 1809: “... since life at most a jest is, / As Philosophers allow, / Still to laugh by far the best is, / Then laugh on – as I do now” (69-72), *BMW*, 13-15, 15.

<sup>49</sup> McGann, *Fiery Dust*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> “Shades of Being: Byron and the Trespassing of Ontology,” *Byron’s Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural*, ed. Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013), 48-82, 51.

hierarchies within figurative language feeds into, comments upon and interacts with a more profound mobile and dialogic intervolving between fictionalised text and external reality. At the very close of canto II, the aforementioned “and be alone on earth, as I am now” is preceded by “to view each loved one blotted from life’s page” (II. 98: 920), the infinitive and the deictic operating in concert to bookend the life-as-text metaphor with which the Preface began.

The Childe seeks to experience the world free from the melancholic prism of his self; the poet seeks to present the world free from the fictionalising prism of poetic representation. The cantos end with acknowledgement of their shared failure, both having chosen a means of escape which only serves to emphasise the futility of the attempt: the Childe’s physical wandering fails because he finds that the self inheres in the physical vehicle which enacts that wandering; the poet’s poetic wandering fails because he finds that a propensity to distort reality inheres in the linguistic and poetic vehicle which enacts that wandering – the linguistic vehicle as imperfect signifier, the poetic vehicle as bound up with the tropes of convention, influence and figuration. Both Childe and poet fail to escape unsatisfactory apprehensions of the world because their dissatisfaction lies in the very medium through which that world is apprehended. It is in the half-mindful essay of the work in this regard, its complex relationship with its own awareness, that its life may be found, its success lying in its nature as performative attempt. Cantos I and II beguile us because they are a mobile enactment of irresolution, their mobility pointed up by their flirtation with the static propensities of conventionality.

The poem's mobile relation between text and reality is a significant manifestation of this, and in typical Byronic fashion the destabilisation is audaciously multidirectional. The Preface to cantos I and II employs the trope of self-deprecation so often found in such material, yet Byron seems ever-mindful of the attenuation of meaningfulness which threatens figurative and literary tropes, seeking to reinvigorate their signification, restoring their nature, as tropes, as that which seeks to *τρέπειν* (*trepein*) – to turn, to direct, to alter, to change. One element of this reinvigoration is the cultivation of a pointed-up otherness, the exploring of the gaps between signifier and signified through which figurative constructions are both enlivened and threatened; another is the tendency to point such constructions in unusual and multiple directions. The vehicle-tenor relationship in “*feuilleter*” is one example; Byron's ostensible self-deprecation is another: in this Preface to the work upon whose publication Byron “awoke one morning and found [him]self famous,”<sup>51</sup> we see in embryo an engagement with separation and sameness which Chapters Four and Five will explore in more detail in relation to Shelley and Byron respectively.

The work is acknowledged to be both imperfect and a construct, the first paragraph referring to “the scenes which it attempts to describe” and “the scenes attempted to be sketched” before stating that the cantos are “merely experimental.”<sup>52</sup> “Attempted to be sketched” suggests that Byron's *aim* is a “sketch,” that the work is *conceived* as an imperfect presentation of reality: “attempted” suggests it falls short, but the standard it falls short of is not reality but a self-consciously perceived construct, a self-aware

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Moore, *The Life, Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, Collected and Arranged with Notes* (London, 1860), 159.

<sup>52</sup> *BMW*, 19.

fictionality which ostensibly stands interestingly at odds with our sense elsewhere of a poet wishing to bear witness to the realities he has seen.

However, true to Byron's capacity to send ripples of destabilised signification in all directions, it is not just the constructed reality of his fictions which he seeks to self-reflexively point up but the constructed fictionality of reality itself. Early in canto I an alexandrine offers the caveat "If ancient tales say true, nor wrong these holy men" (l. 7: 63). Similarly, in his "Addition to the Preface" Byron counters one of "the many objections" to the "character of the 'vagrant Childe'" – that "he is very *unknightly*, as the times of the Knights were times of love, honour, and so forth" – by exposing the fallacy, as he sees it, of such romanticised conceptions of "the good old times."<sup>53</sup> Faced with the perceived gap between reality and its fictionalised representation, Byron closes the gap through realigning our conception of the *former* rather than the latter, concluding, with a dismissive "so much for chivalry," that "that most unamiable personage Childe Harold ... was so far perfectly knightly in his attributes" if we conceive "knightly" based on the reality of the conduct of knights rather than the romanticised, mediated and fictionalised lens through which we perceive reality.<sup>54</sup> Concluding that "a little investigation will teach us not to regret these monstrous mummeries of the middle ages,"<sup>55</sup> in the dismissive appellation he aligns the ceremonial pomp which attends our notion of knightly behaviour with the fiction of a mummer's play. Where we might expect the mobile and malleable artifice of art to

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 21.

stake claim to being a representation of the fixed truth of reality, it is reality itself which is found to be a mobile and malleable thing.

Frederick Garber writes that “self-making and text-making imply and implicate each other,” that “they play off against each other and do much to determine each other’s modes of being”;<sup>56</sup> we find a similar relation not between text and self but between text and world, each by turns shoring up, modifying and destabilising the other. Thus the “difficult, ambivalent attitude toward the self’s autonomy”<sup>57</sup> is equally true in Byron of his attitude towards the world’s autonomy as an unambiguous entity, the verity of our perception of which is repeatedly called into question.<sup>58</sup> The fixed position which forms our vantage point for observing one form of mobility is found to shift underfoot and itself be subject to destabilisation; just as Garber notes of self and text, we have a “paradoxical mutuality” in the relationship between world and text, as if “each needed to have the other in process in order to be in process itself.”<sup>59</sup>

When Byron writes during the Cadiz bullfight scene that “None through their cold disdain are doom’d to die, / As moon-struck bards complain, by Love’s sad archery” (I. 72: 727), or makes the point, mentioned above, that he is “survey[ing]” Parnassus “Not in the fabled landscape of a lay” (I. 60: 614), he at once exacerbates and ameliorates not only the otherness of his text in relation to reality, but the otherness of reality in relation to our conditioned perception, undermining our propensity to view

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<sup>56</sup> Garber, ix.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>58</sup> In this aspect of Byron’s approach to the external world I accord with some of the tendencies noted by Emily A. Bernhardt Jackson in *Byron’s Philosophy of Knowledge*; where we differ is in the extent to which we see this as a cohering and ultimately coherent vision.

<sup>59</sup> Garber, x.

life as subject to narrative tropes. His work seeks not simply to present a true representation of reality in contrast to romanticised fictional depictions through a sense of the bleeding of the real world into what might otherwise be a falsely stylised text, but to present a true representation of the world in contrast to a fictionalised perception of reality through a sense that texts have bled into our perceptions of the real world. As Chapter Five will explore, a drawing of our attention to a text's otherness from that which it depicts, and a reflexive occupation with text-making, forms a key component of Byron's poetic making in the middle cantos of *Don Juan*.

#### IV

Not only is there an intervolving between fictionalised text and external reality in which one is no less malleable and open to question than the other, but we also find external reality subject to a dissolution of the boundaries between the phenomenal and the noumenal: moments in which we see a poetic enactment of the "language of the sense" (109)<sup>60</sup> alongside a simultaneous engagement with the processes and limitations of that enactment. This combination of enactment through the poetic process and self-reflexive, often sceptical engagement with both enactment and process is a key element of both poets, though its particular manifestation differs.

In Byron's representation of the "variegated maze" (I. 18: 237) of Cintra the description is disconnected, compartmentalised, serial vignettes whose nature as such is pointed up by the stanza's formal operations, the "mix'd in one mighty scene" of

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<sup>60</sup> William Wordsworth, "Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," *WMW*, 131-35.

the alexandrine rendered an ostensible acknowledgement of failure through the preceding regularity of the end-stopped lines and repeated definite article:

The horrid crags, by toppling convent crown'd,  
The cork-trees hoar that clothe the shaggy steep,  
The mountain-moss by scorching skies imbrown'd,  
The sunken glen, whose sunless shrubs must weep,  
The tender azure of the unruffled deep,  
The orange tints that gild the greenest bough,  
The torrents that from cliff to valley leap,  
The vine on high, the willow branch below,  
Mix'd in one mighty scene, with varied beauty glow.  
(I. 19: 243-51)

The increased compartmentalisation of the penultimate line as Byron narrows his focus to the “willow branch” and the “vine on high” (so etymologically appropriate for a vignette) further points up both the inexpressibility of the totality of the scene and the artifice of artistic representation – again, a gap cultivated to a subtly meaningful end.

As with the description of St. Peter's in canto IV, Byron and the reader “must break, / To separate contemplation, the great whole” through “piecemeal” apprehension of its constituent parts (IV. 157: 1405-06), acknowledging structurally that “our outward sense / Is but of gradual grasp” (IV. 158: 1414-15). In both descriptions, Byron allows the literary trope of acknowledging the impossibility of artistic verisimilitude to bleed into the impossibility of a full apprehension of the world. He knows that many a literary representation gains its power from the paradoxical acknowledgement that commensurate description is impossible; here this is extended to embrace the notion that our experience of life through the prism of the phenomenal world lies in its nature



as an imperfect rendering of the noumenal. By writing in such a way that we sense one gap (between the world as we experience it through the senses and the literary representation of that experienced world – between language and the “language of the sense”), Byron opens up our awareness of another gap (between the “language of the sense” and the noumenal *Ding an sich*).<sup>61</sup>

Whereas in canto IV he hints at the transcendence of a “dilat[ion]” of “Our spirits to the size of that they contemplate” (IV. 158: 1421-22), at Cintra Byron allows imperfect realisation to stand as a subtle constituent of our affective response, the effect not a pejorative comment upon the limitations of phenomenal apprehension but an acknowledgement that this is life as it is experienced, its mystery and limitation accepted and held on the page unabashedly present but unresolved. It is the negatively capable Byron, accepting and presenting the phenomenal world as one whose “things” may not “dovetail ... in [the] mind”:<sup>62</sup> the world and life as we experience it may not be the *Ding an sich*, but the ineffability of it not being so forms part of the tapestry which Byron suggests we should take for all-in-all, for “is it not life: is it not *the thing?*”<sup>63</sup>

In this acknowledged gap between the phenomenal and the noumenal, the metonym for the ineffable is motion: the vignettes are presented, their state as “mix’d in one

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Vasilis Politis; trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (London: Everyman, 1993), 205-15.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Keats to George and Tom Keats, 22 December 1819, *KMW*, 370.

<sup>63</sup> Letter from Byron to Kinnaird, Oct. 26 1819, *BLJ*, vol. xi, 232.

mighty scene” acknowledged, but it is the motion, the nature of the mingling, which is beyond our ken. We find a similar descriptive mode in canto II:

The Turk, the Greek, the Albanian, and the Moor,  
Here mingled in their many-hued array,  
While the deep war-drum’s sound announc’d the close of day.

The wild Albanian kirtled to his knee,  
With shawl-girt head and ornamented gun,  
And gold-embroider’d garments, fair to see:  
The crimson-scarfed men of Macedon;  
The Delhi with his cap of terror on,  
And crooked glaive; the lively, supple Greek:  
And swarthy Nubia’s mutilated son;  
The bearded Turk, that rarely deigns to speak,  
Master of all around, too potent to be meek,

Are mix’d conspicuous ...

(II. 57-59: 511-23)

The scene’s constituent elements are itemised, the fact that they “mingled” and “are mix’d” is stated, but Byron not only stops short of attempting to describe the nature of that mingling but writes such that the absence of the attempt is permitted its own significance. The fact that the “scene” is “motley” and “varies round” is acknowledged, yet Byron’s deictic trope is employed here to emphasise spatial differentiation (“There...”; “Here...”) and the syndetic constructions (“And crooked glaive”; “And swarthy Nubia’s mutilated son”; “And some that smoke, and some that play”) contribute to a sense of disparate elements whose nature *as* disparate elements may be described through piecemeal apprehension, but the complexities of their conspicuous mixing is left conspicuously unattempted:

... some recline in groups,  
 Scanning the motley scene that varies round;  
 There some grave Moslem to devotion stoops,  
 And some that smoke, and some that play, are found;  
 Here the Albanian proudly treads the ground ...  
 (II. 59: 523-27)

Byron is content to let such complexities go unexamined, their incomprehensibility a source of quotidian vibrancy. Just as he draws canto I to a close by suggesting that we “do not ask” of “that worst” darkness that may lie at “Man’s heart,” “forbear[ing] ... from the search” and not “ventur[ing] to unmask” its secrets (“To Inez” 9: 869-72), so we should not seek to lift the painted veil but rather acknowledge that its nature as such is part of the bittersweet charm of a lived life.

## V

Byron’s intermittent flirtations with larger philosophical questions, and his intermittent readiness to leave these as flirtations only, might be seen pejoratively – part of a neophytic unevenness within these early cantos. To do so would be to misrepresent the poem: certainly, one might argue that the poem is not an unequivocal success, but in doing so we may be viewing the text through the prism of a particular understanding of success, one which Byron does not share.

The negatively capable play of Byron’s descriptive mode is one manifestation of his distrust of system, a Pyrrhonic scepticism which allows within its purview, without allowing itself to be shaped by, the potential for nihilism existing in both textual playfulness and the operations of provisionality explored in this thesis. A teleological

cultural paradigm is, certainly, one of the many targets for Byronic disruption, but the critic should resist mistaking such disruption for the assumption of a dysteleological position when, in fact, this would be as subject to Byronic scepticism as its opposite – if only because it *is* a position. The mobile essay of Byron’s scepticism may light upon nihilism and cynicism, but is different in kind, predicated on a suspicion of the systematised nature of the fixed position unbendingly held, whilst both universal nihilism and universal cynicism are themselves fixed positions, closed systems of thought.

In this respect I agree with Terence Hoagwood’s views that Byron exhibits a “dialectical suspension of doctrinal certainty,”<sup>64</sup> and that an unclouded examination of the “abandonment to immediacy”<sup>65</sup> through which such a suspension may manifest itself has proved elusive in the face of a largely unarticulated belief in a “conventional fondness for believing something”<sup>66</sup> unthinkingly and unknowingly projected onto the poet and his work. Hoagwood suggests that much criticism “ostensibly acknowledge[s]” Byron’s “‘scepticism’,” but “at the same time affirmations or positive positions are alleged for him”;<sup>67</sup> I would add that this is equally the case for denials or negative positions, when in fact the mobility of a Pyrrhonic scepticism is an end in itself – or, perhaps more accurately if paradoxically, the absence of an end is an end in itself. As Hoagwood notes, often with regard to Byron “the commonplace assumption that one must believe something is coupled with a two-item menu: Byron

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<sup>64</sup> Terence Allan Hoagwood, *Byron’s Dialectic: Skepticism and the Critique of Culture* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1993; London; Toronto: Associated UP, 1993), 15.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* Hoagwood cites Edward Wayne Marjaram, David J. Leigh and Jean Hall specifically in this regard, and implicates Michael G. Cooke and Andrew M. Cooper with similar charges.

is saying that he does believe X, or he must be saying that X is false.”<sup>68</sup> To acknowledge, through the operations of his poetic making or more explicitly, the gaps between the fictionalised, the phenomenal and the noumenal, is not necessarily, and certainly not in Byron’s case, to write pejoratively of life and the world; rather, it is to accept and present a vitalising element of the human condition.

However, my agreement with Hoagwood only reaches so far. Whilst the “conventional fondness for believing something” does prove deleterious to a full understanding of Byron’s position if only that it assumes the positing *of* a position within Byron, it fails to acknowledge that the cantos and their poet are not entirely exempt from such “conventional fondness” – rather, this too is part of the cantos’ theatre of contention. The vital instability of Byron’s poem is not characterised by unbounded freedom but by a process of asserting freedom within potential bounds; not freely mobile but an imperfect enactment of freeing. Byron’s verse is not play but interplay, and the purview of this interplay includes an acknowledgement, in the act of imperfect shrugging-off, of the human inclination towards “conventional fondness[es]” from which Byron is not exempt.

Byron’s most sustained period of philosophical postulation within these cantos comes early in canto II. Tellingly placed between – and surely occasioned by – the sight of Athens and the death of John Edleston, lie five stanzas in which Byron attempts to present the experience of a free contemplation of the perceived facticity of human mortality and the consolations of the afterlife, and as such it is characterised by a

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 89.

mobile vacillation. In both subject matter and descriptive tropes this is both Byron's 'to be or not to be' and his 'alas, poor Yorick', beginning:

Bound to the earth, he lifts his eye to heaven—  
Is't not enough, unhappy thing! to know  
Thou art? Is this a boon so kindly given,  
That being, thou wouldst be again, and go,  
Thou know'st not, reck'st not to what region, so  
On earth no more, but mingled with the skies?  
Still wilt thou dream on future joy and woe?

[...]  
Remove yon skull from out the scatter'd heaps:  
Is that a temple where a God may dwell?  
Why ev'n the worm at last disdains her shatter'd cell!

Look on its broken arch, its ruin'd wall,  
Its chambers desolate, and portals foul:  
Yes, this was once Ambition's airy hall,  
The dome of Thought, the palace of the Soul:  
Behold through each lack-lustre, eyeless hole,  
The gay recess of Wisdom and of Wit  
And Passion's host, that never brook'd control:  
Can all, saint, sage, or sophist ever writ,  
People this lonely tower, this tenement refit?  
(II. 4-6: 29-54)

The implications of "bound" add equivocation to the stanza and to the ostensible nature of the interrogatives as purely rhetorical devices, as does the "mingled with the skies," its descriptive force connoting a degree of speculation, of "dream[ing] on" the nature of the afterlife by the poet even in his admonishment of his subject for doing the same. As such, it presages the contemplation of the skull. Gleckner praises the "juxtaposition of the ruined shrines ... with the ... burial urn and the skull" as "an extraordinary one, for the elements of each part serve admirably to fortify and amplify the elements of the other parts," leading him to state that "the hymn to the skull ... is

the beginning of the poet's wisdom."<sup>69</sup> Bernard Beatty takes a different view, viewing "is that a temple where a God may dwell" as being "ask[ed] disdainfully," arguing that "the implication is that there are no gods in the temple and no inhabiting spirit in the flesh. There is an irrevocable gap between flesh and spirit."<sup>70</sup> It seems to me that Byron is deliberately allowing his lines to look in both these directions: pathos of the kind Gleckner suggests, but with a potential undermining in the very neatness of the architectural conceit, leaving the line "is that a temple where a God may dwell" flirting with a self-questioning bathos. The following lines inhabit a similarly ambiguous position:

Well didst thou speak, Athena's wisest son!  
 'All that we know is, nothing can be known.'  
 Why should we shrink from what we cannot shun?  
(II. 7: 55-57)

In his praise of the Socratic dictum we sense a poet aware of the human temptation to seek for meaning and knowledge in spite of this, and the "why should we shrink from what we cannot shun" hovers between confident assertion and genuine questioning wrapped in an affected aloofness. As such, the lines present as facets of the human condition both the need to question *and* the need to affect an aloofness from that need to question. John Morley compares Byron unfavourably to Shelley by arguing that the former "is never moved by the strength of his passion or the depth of his contemplation quite away from the round earth."<sup>71</sup> This is perhaps true in a way Morley does not intend, if we focus on that "quite." Hidden in plain sight, the performative operations

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<sup>69</sup> Gleckner, 70-71.

<sup>70</sup> "Determining Unknown Modes of Being: A Map of Byron's Ghosts and Spirits," *Byron's Ghosts*, 30-47, 35.

<sup>71</sup> John Morley, *Critical Miscellanies*, 1871, 251-90. *BCH*, 384-409, 391.

of his verse here suggest a delicacy and depth to Byron's contemplation which runs beneath the lines' rather more cursory ostensible consideration, as they enact the very process of reaching towards and then rejecting a movement "away from the round earth," but in doing so allowing this very process to stand as representative of the human condition.

Arthur Symonds writes that Byron's "mind was without subtlety; whatever he felt he felt without reservation, or the least thinking about feeling.... There is force, clearness, but no atmosphere; everything is seen detached, a little bare, very distinct, in a strong light without shadows."<sup>72</sup> It is precisely to this kind of reading of Byron that these lines and the lines concerning the skull ostensibly lend themselves, yet beneath the surface "strong light" lie the ripples of conflicting "shadows" of the very "subtlety," "reservation" and "thinking about feeling" which Symonds feels is missing in the poet's work. Morley writes of Byron that it is "seldom a necessity with Byron" to "recover some portion of the imprisoned essence" of his lines by "surrender[ing] our whole minds" to them because "His words tell us all he mean to say, and do not merely hint or suggest. The matter with which he deals is gigantic, and he paints with violent colours and sweeping pencil."<sup>73</sup> Lines such as these simultaneously demonstrate the origin of such critical contentions and give the lie to those contentions if we reject the temptation to, as Gleckner says of many critical responses to Byron, "take the obvious to be all."<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Charles Robinson cites these lines as evidence of Byron's "philosophical scepticism" in comparison to Shelley, who Robinson says "opposed

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<sup>72</sup> Arthur Symonds, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry*, BCH, 497-505, 498.

<sup>73</sup> *Critical Miscellanies*, BCH, 395.

<sup>74</sup> Gleckner, xii.



Byron's smiling 'Despair' with the principle of hope,"<sup>75</sup> but does not interrogate the ways in which Byron's lines performatively complicate his own position, just as, in Chapters Two and Six, we will see Shelley performatively complicate his own ostensible assertions of hope.

In the following line there is an externalising of an internal admonishment – an unwillingness to succumb to the contemplations Keats explores in his "Ode to a Nightingale," where "palsy shakes a few sad, last grey hairs, / And youth grows pale and spectre-thin and dies" (25-26):<sup>76</sup>

Each hath his pang, but feeble sufferers groan  
With brain-born dreams of evil all their own.

(II. 7: 58-59)

The strength of Byron's rejection of this morbidity is predicated on an awareness of the strength of its pull, the power of its siren song; we have a Byron who is critical of those who wallow in their "brain-born dreams" because he knows too well the very real attractions of such mind-forged manacles, to which he himself is far from immune.

Like the axiomatic certainty of the final couplet of another of Keats' famous odes,<sup>77</sup> the declarative power of "pursue what Chance or Fate proclaimeth best" (II. 7: 60) is

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<sup>75</sup> *The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight*, 9.

<sup>76</sup> *KMW*, 285-8, 286.

<sup>77</sup> "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49-50), "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *KMW*, 288-89, 289.

paradoxically weakened by being a little *too* declarative, a little too neat and simple, even prior to the “yet” which heralds the reopened speculation of the following stanza:

Yet if, as holiest men have deem'd, there be  
A land of souls beyond that sable shore,  
To shame the doctrine of the Sadducee  
And sophists, madly vain of dubious lore;  
How sweet it were in concert to adore  
With those who made our mortal labours light!  
To hear each voice we fear'd to hear no more!  
Behold each mighty shade reveal'd to sight,  
The Bactrian, Samian sage, and all who taught the right!  
(II. 8: 64-72)

In this meditation on mortality Byron half-admits to the consolations of an afterlife whilst at the same time half-advocating acceptance of not knowing. He asks why we wonder at what we cannot know, and proceeds to wonder. There is a sense of vacillation, of being unable to do what he himself suggests, the philosophical corollary of the narrative tendency to digress, admonish himself for his digression, and digress again. In his later epic his response is more peremptory:

Few mortals know what end they would be at,  
But whether glory, power, or love, or treasure,  
The path is through perplexing ways, and when  
The goal is gain'd, we die, you know—and then——  
  
What then?—I do not know, no more do you—  
And so good night.— Return we to our story  
(*DJ* I. 133-4: 1061-66)

Yet to see Byron being unsuccessful in the conveying of his message in *Childe*

*Harold's Pilgrimage* is to misunderstand the nature of the text, for there is a message in the two messages' contradiction: an open admission to being entirely human; to taking an intellectual approach to something, but in pronouncing that intellectual approach, seeing it as dogma which closes off not simply a line of thinking but a mode of apprehension. Rather than closing it off for the sake of narrative exigency or rhetorical consistency, he admits of the yearning, presenting vacillation in action, and so approaches an apprehension of what it is to be human: not the rationalising against wondering, not the hopeful wondering, but the movements between, and if there is something inconclusive about this, there is something alive about it. For Byron, the avowed and well-argued commitment to one way of seeing things would be not a sign of success but a sign of failure. If we are to judge the success or otherwise of Byron's poem, we must acknowledge that one of the things in which the poem is engaged is a problematizing of success.

This is not to say that Byron's apparent playfulness and his sceptical approach does not hold the potential to become systematised – for mobility to become a trope as much as those tropes he makes mobile – but it is to suggest that a self-reflexive awareness of this potential operates in a dialogical relation with the text's own self, such that the text is both an enactment of and an engagement with its own operations. Meaninglessness is more readily seen as present in the interplay of Byron's mobile work if one makes the assumption of the greater meaningfulness of destination; the work may be more readily seen pejoratively as lacking in a coherent and fixed position if one makes the assumption of the greater meaningfulness of fixed positions *per se*. Byron's poetic making performatively contends that such assumption of posited meaning in an utterance, a text or a life is a strain of dogmatism as surely as any other

system, including an assumption of no meaning at all. Seen in such a light, his text as made manifest in its various permutations of mobility operating in concert with potential forms of stasis is an enactment of “life: ... *the thing*,” rather than the false credos of both a destinal fallacy and uninhibited poetic play. Byron’s work in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* enacts – and engages with its own nature as – an encoding of mobile operation in interplay with potential fixities, performative in its sceptical and necessarily equivocal eschewal of the dogmatism of completeness and cessation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “A Throng of Thoughts and Forms”:

#### The Holding of Unstable Meaning in Shelley’s Lyric Poetry

##### I

In Act Four of *Prometheus Unbound*, Earth makes the following observation:

Language is a perpetual Orphic song,  
Which rules with daedal harmony a throng  
Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were.  
(*PU* IV. 415-17)

William Keach, in setting forward his argument in *Shelley’s Style*, says of these lines: “Important though this is as an example of Shelley’s linguistic ideal, it is not, I believe, indicative of his prevailing attitude or his poetic practice.”<sup>1</sup> On this point I disagree with Keach: it seems to me that the words aptly express the subtleties to be found within the poet’s work. To take two of Shelley’s most famous lyrics as examples, the “harmony” in the “perpetual Orphic song” of language within the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Ode to the West Wind” is indeed “daedal” in nature, admitting within its walls not just intricate artistry and the possibility of transcendent flight, but also the inconstantly-glanced perceptibility of alternative routes and contrary turns. The poems’ songs sing reflexively of both the “senseless[ness] and shapeless[ness]” awaiting the “throng / Of thoughts and forms” should that song’s

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<sup>1</sup> Keach, xvi.

“rule” be relinquished, and that same rule’s propensity to restrict as much as it shapes. In each poem the fluid grapple of Shelley’s verse is such that his lines hold their potential to be otherwise, and live in the crucible of their preclusion.

I concluded the previous chapter by pointing towards moments which admit of complex conflections of seemingly antithetical positions within *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron’s text benefiting from a paradoxical ontological vitality afforded by the mind’s transmutational engagement with its positions’ negations. Both of these elements are writ large in Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” its subject a profession of faith most evident in its doubtfulness, to an object whose substance feels most evident in its evanescence. These librating interchanges each intervolve, and in the manner of all faith: epistemological occlusion serves to rouse faith’s augmentation as if in flight from its potential to diminish it, leaving us in the tenderness of doubtful faith, just as the first line’s ending hovers between augmenting hypercatalexis and diminishing elision to leave “Power” in a liminal state between empowerment and disempowerment:

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
Floats though unseen amongst us,—visiting  
This various world with as inconstant wing ...  
(1-3)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations from “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” are from the version published by Leigh Hunt in the *Examiner*, 19 January 1817 (*SMW*, 114-17), unless stated otherwise. Discussion of the discovery of the Scrope Davies notebook and the implications of the different versions of the “Hymn” and “Mont Blanc” in light of this may be found in Judith Chernaik and Timothy Burnett, “The Byron and Shelley Notebook in the Scrope Davies Find,” *The Review of English Studies* 29 (1978): 36-49; in Michael O’Neill, “Shelley’s Lyric Art,” *SPP*, 616-19, and in my own ““Straining After Impossibilities’: Textual Presentation and the Scrope Davies Find,” *The Keats-Shelley Review* 27.2 (2013): 91-104.

The same metrical subtlety occurs, though for a different purpose, in the “Ode to the West Wind”:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven ...

(1-3)

We find, as we often find in Shelley, a formal complexity whose effects run counter to expectations, as if the device serves to point up its possible effect only for a delicate eschewal to offer quiet insistence against the rule of the song. In the “Hymn,” the position of “Power” is one of vulnerable complexity as we sense a momentary arrest against the enjambment’s fluency, as if glimpsing the substance of the power as “senseless and shapeless” and thus imperfectly served by the concretising harmony of the form’s rule.

Keach comments on a similar effect in *Alastor* with “suspend / Her timid steps” (104-105), noting that “the antelope’s ‘timid steps’ are momentarily and delicately suspended on the word ‘suspend’ at the break between [the] lines,”<sup>3</sup> and Michael O’Neill makes a related observation regarding “Mont Blanc” when referring to the lines, “...the strange sleep / Which when the voices of the desert fail / Wraps all in its own deep eternity;—” (27-29),<sup>4</sup> seeing the positioning of “fail” at the enjambed line-end as part of “a blend of energy and forlornness.”<sup>5</sup> Keach observes that in Shelley

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<sup>3</sup> Keach, 167.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from “Mont Blanc” are from the version published in *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (SMW, 120-24), unless stated otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> *The Human Mind’s Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley’s Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989), 31. Hereafter, O’Neill.

“enjambéd endings may contribute to effects of subtly disjunctive pause as well as of speed and momentum.”<sup>6</sup> The observation is correct, and is one to which this thesis shall return, but on this occasion it does not quite pin down the peculiar sense of the enjambment’s contribution being in spite of itself, and the sense – to return to our example from the beginning of the “Hymn” – of the enjambment as overly insistent in its fluency. Similarly, the combination of the spondaic final foot and the syntactical inversion of adjective and noun imbues the “dead” of the second line of the “Ode” with a subtle resistance to the enjambment, suggestive of Shelley’s conflicting feelings towards the wind.

In the Introduction to this thesis I suggested a rethinking of C. S. Lewis’ characterisation of Shelley’s poetic making as “untrammelled, reckless speed through pellucid spaces”<sup>7</sup> in favour of a greater critical awareness of the poetry’s engagement with undertows of enervation; I also suggested that Lewis’ position was in part a manifestation of a widely-held critical assumption of the poet’s ardency overly informed by biography impinging on analysis. As with the respective interactions between “Power” and “dead” and their enjambed lines in the “Hymn” and the “Ode” respectively, it is right to argue that Shelley’s work is energised by interchange such that we are hard-pressed to find unqualified or unproblematised fixed meaning and an absence of relational complexity anywhere – indeed, as we shall come to see, it might be argued that when we *do* find ostensible absence of relational complexity, its very relation to the complexity around it is meaning-making. Shelley’s verse is “vitality

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<sup>6</sup> Keach, 167.

<sup>7</sup> *Rehabilitations*, 28.



metaphorical,”<sup>8</sup> abounding with self-inwoven similes, inverted metaphors and constructions which defy fixity, often audacious in its multidirectional ambiguities and deftness of touch as it negotiates shifting positions, reflexivities, modes of perception and dialogical shades of meaning and belief.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as with Byron, the subtlety of Shelley’s verse is ill-served by an attendance to its operations which does not acknowledge that a vital (in both senses) element in such an interchange is the glanced possibility of fixity and enervation: that is to say, that Shelley’s verse is more accurately characterised as a “theatre of contention” rather than “a scene of perpetual disturbance.”

## II

If we turn aside the perception of Shelley as enacting the untrammelled mobility of an unmediated ardency and submit to the possibility that much of the complexity of Shelley’s poetry is born of a dialogue between idealism and scepticism, the formal concomitant is surely a dialogue between idealism and pragmatism: an awareness that a moving *beyond* the restrictions of form and language may only ever be conveyed by a mindful moving *through*; doubtful faith in the power of language combining with the knowledge that meaning is made in dalliance with language’s imperfections, which serve to energise even in – and often as a direct consequence of – their potential to enervate. In the “Hymn” Shelley asks:

Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,  
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?

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<sup>8</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, SMW, 697.

<sup>9</sup> As Timothy Morton puts it, we have lines which “display Shelley describing the dream as being like an image of a dream of an idea of a dream of an image, in a dizzying spiral of hyperreal language, in which we begin not to be able to tell which level is the ground,” “Introduction,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, 1-14, 9.

We light with the ease of familiarity upon, or rather skate the “sheer” surface of, the middle clause, only for the caesura and the trochaic inversion of “vacant” to point up what we already half-perceive: the phrase’s nature as – to return to the lines from Shelley’s *Speculations on Metaphysics* mentioned in the Introduction – “word[s] combined a thousand times before” and thus, as Hogle has it, “hollowed out by time,”<sup>10</sup> the words “dead,” the thoughts “cold and borrowed,” a “pellucid” single unit of sense “vacant” of the preceding lines’ energy. In Shelley’s hands, though, its very deadness is meaningful, through a readerly response which is a product of two different affective responses acting upon one another, one more mindful than the other, in a kind of proto-Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt* conveying both the potential “figurality of all signification”<sup>11</sup> and the reader’s prior blindness to it. The first response is for “the familiarity of the phrase” to “cheat us into assent,”<sup>12</sup> which transmutes into awareness of the phrase as “a topos ... which crumbles into a cliché”;<sup>13</sup> the lines thus enact that very “vacan[cy] and desolat[ion]” afforded by the “pass[ing] away” of intellectual beauty, generating a metaresponse in which the reader feels implicated in easy accedence to the “tritest plagiarisms” left by its passing. Thus, as suggested above, ostensible absence of relational complexity, when it is found, operates as meaning-making in relation to the complexity around it.

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<sup>10</sup> Hogle, 19. The phrase is apt, though Hogle uses it in relation to his characterization of the view of Shelley held by “the later Harold Bloom and his progeny” (19), a view which, ultimately and for the most part, he rejects.

<sup>11</sup> de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” 116.

<sup>12</sup> O’Neill, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 37.

In the “Ode,” too, poetry enacts the process which is its subject: as Richard Cronin notes, in Shelley’s poetry technical elements of the work “are not vehicles of the poem’s meaning but expressions of it,”<sup>14</sup> as we see if we explore Shelley’s reference to the “thorns of life” and the lines around it:

... I would ne’er have striven

As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.  
Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed  
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

(51-56)

The proleptic “as thus” asks us to read the lines themselves as a “striv[ing],” the work of someone “chained and bowed”: again, through their ostensible failings the lines succeed, just as the line expressing the giving-over to the wind is itself a giving-over to the “random and superficial properties of the signifier,”<sup>15</sup> with the syntax of leaf-cloud-wave required by the stanza’s opening tercet – “If I were a dead leaf”; “If I were a swift cloud”; “A wave to pant ...” (43-45) – becoming wave-leaf-cloud in its subjection to the *terza rima*. Consequently, when “bowed” looks back to “cloud” the word does not just express, but *is*, its own submission, Shelley “chained and bowed” by the “heavy weight” of form, itself transmuting between the pressures of *terza rima* and sonnet and between ode, hymn, and vocative apostrophe. Creatively, the twists and turns of Shelley’s verse occasion even as they prevent, and not as the mere

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Cronin, *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), 76.

<sup>15</sup> de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” 114.

unavoidable products of language's imperfection but as part of a generative grapple with self-generated resistance, daedal in its making of the labyrinth it negotiates. They point us towards language's propensity to fix meaning only to find that what is fixed is, in its very fixity, devoid of meaning, words cast as "dead," units of meaning calcified into units of meaninglessness.

Whilst we might thus characterise the poet's work as enacting a flight from this propensity in language, it would be more accurate to see the poetry as plotting an ever-mindful middle course between language's potential to deaden meaning and language's value as an imperfect but essential tool for corralling thought, our poet pragmatically adopting the tool's imperfection as a tool in itself in "a self-conscious effort to exploit," as Keach puts it, "the unique but imperfect relation between language and thought."<sup>16</sup> However, this too falls short of appreciating the poetry's mindfulness of the vitalising paradoxes of signification, and here we find to be germane once again the lines from *Prometheus Unbound* with which the present chapter begins: the reference to language as "a perpetual Orphic song / Which rules with daedal harmony a throng / Of thoughts and forms, which else senseless and shapeless were." One question which arises is this: do we read the lines as suggesting that both "thoughts and forms" would be both "senseless and shapeless" or whether "thoughts and forms" would be "senseless and shapeless" respectively?

The answer has implications for the "Hymn," the "Ode," and for Shelley's work generally. Affinity between "thought" and "sense," and "form" and "shape," does just

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<sup>16</sup> Keach, 42.

enough to afford primacy to the latter interpretation, whilst the sentence structure and repeated conjunction do just enough to stave off the fully concretised discreteness of relation between adjective and referent, a relational ambiguity which, like an echo of an echo, affords a concomitant but even fainter slippage of the distinction between each referent itself: a weakening of the ontological boundary between “thoughts” and “forms.” By the same token, if the “harmon[ising]” nature of the “rule” of the “Orphic song” suggests a rearrangement involving a continuing reliance on interconnection, then this surely must apply not only between different thoughts and between different forms, but also between thoughts and forms: it is “*a throng*” (my italics) in which both “thoughts and forms” are united, both before and after the imposition of language’s rule, the collective noun serving to undermine the separation of “thought” and “form” in a similar manner to the universal pronoun “all” acting upon the coordinating conjunction “or” in stanza two of the “Hymn”:

Spirit of BEAUTY, that doth consecrate  
 With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
 Of human thought or form ...  
 (13-15)

The destabilising of the boundaries between thought and form and the tentativeness of this destabilising are equally important, allowing both Shelley’s contention that “nothing exists but as it is perceived”<sup>17</sup> and simultaneous doubt regarding the contention’s veracity – a delicate combination operating in precisely the right key to

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<sup>17</sup> “On Life,” *SMW*, 634; 635.

express the poet's views on the subject, capturing both the possibility of a Berkeleyan immaterialist idealism and Kenneth Cameron's view that "Shelley is really advancing a sceptical position."<sup>18</sup> The transmutational nature of the poetics of both lyrics is consistent with Shelley's genuine vacillation in this regard.<sup>19</sup>

A second ambiguity germane to the lyrics lies in "senseless," where again a primary meaning fails to preclude a destabilising secondary semantic echo. Shelley suggests that language imposes a harmonious rule on the chaotic throng of our thoughts sufficient for us to make sense of them; yet the word as Shelley uses it possesses just enough pliability to admit the meaning but not so much that its potential for alternative meaning-making fails to inform our response. For "senseless" surely implies too that without language our thoughts are in some way devoid of sense, of meaning, themselves: the whispered suggestion of a "reciprocal interdependence between language and consciousness"<sup>20</sup> – language acting reciprocally to create meaning in our thoughts; and further, the paradoxical possibility that our thoughts might be truly "senseless" without language, insensible, not sentient, as implied by the claim that Prometheus "gave man speech, and speech created thought" (*PU* II. iv. 72). Both interpretative questions are significant, not just because the "Hymn" and the "Ode" possess an imaginative fecundity which goes beyond language as just "an arbitrary

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<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Neill Cameron sees Shelley's proclamation that "nothing exists but as it is perceived" in combination with his wider prose writing and concludes that the poet "is not denying the existence of an external universe, but is arguing only that whatever is known is known only through the senses, and the senses disclose nothing more than sensation. Knowledge is knowledge of thought substance only," *Shelley: The Golden Years* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1974), 153.

<sup>19</sup> That is to say, entirely consistent with the views of a poet who, if he believed that "the difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thought, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and of external objects," chose to express it in the same short work twice, once standing alone in its aforementioned axiomatic surety, and once preceded by tortuous convolution: "I confess that I am one of those who is unable to refuse my assent to the conclusions of those philosophers who assert that nothing exists but as it is perceived." "On Life," *SMW*, 635; 634.

<sup>20</sup> Keach, 37.

product of the imagination, ... a medium supremely conducive of yet resistant to the mental activity from which it derives,”<sup>21</sup> but because each poem’s transmutational operations may be seen fruitfully through the prism of a tentative and varying immaterialism ill at ease with its solipsism.

Intellectual beauty and the West Wind are both knowable only obliquely, experienced through their less intangible effects which serve to make manifest the otherwise ungraspable. What complicates this is their consequent readiness to adhere analogically to the relationship between thought and language: the poems cannot help but be processes of semiotic evocation of processes of semiotic evocation, with all the attendant reflexive complexity this implies. This attempt to grasp and control through language is also complicated by the centrality of being ungraspable and uncontrollable in the eponymous subjects’ ontology: any attempt to demystify that which is “dearer for its mystery” (12)<sup>22</sup> or control the “Uncontrollable!” (47)<sup>23</sup> is likely to be defeated by its own act. We see, too, the tentative immaterialism and tentative belief in the generative power of language discussed above, the corollaries of which are related: tentative immaterialism leads to an ever-imperfect conflation of the wind with its effects, and of intellectual beauty with its passing, as both the same thing and not the same thing; similarly, the poetic creations themselves are conceived in each poem as both being and not being the same thing as their constituent thoughts.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>22</sup> “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.”

<sup>23</sup> “Ode to the West Wind.”

It is through language imbued with the energies of transmutation that these interrelations are made known: words, alone and in combination, which subtly fail to disavow multiple meanings, resonances, referents and functions, enacting processes that participate in other processes, remaining vitalised in the face of signification's capacity to fix meaning and so arrest and mute its dialogic and generative nature. This resolute vitality enables language in Shelley's hands to hold not only fluid ontologies but a shifting and complex fluidity in which the boundaries between ontology and epistemology themselves are in doubt.

Taking the lyrics together, one might be inclined to see the "awful shadow" of the first line of the "Hymn" as possessing a similar relation to the "unseen Power" as the "wild West Wind" does to "Autumn" in the first line of the "Ode." In each instance they function as subordinate avatars which, though themselves unseen, possess just enough semiotic adhesion to operate as a workable bridge between the ineffable and the concrete; they may be conveyed just enough to show their inability to be conveyed, and by placing them at one remove from something defined relationally as less definable, Shelley achieves the impossible task of conveying ineffability, a task which actively works against itself: the more you succeed the more you fail, and vice versa. However, in each case both their distinctness and their hierarchical relation are destabilised – an operation entirely appropriate for both the west wind and, in particular, intellectual beauty, whose nature is such that comprehension and presence are effectively the same, and a slipping away of our capacity to conceptualise it an enactment of a slipping away of the thing itself. In the "Ode," for example, "breath of Autumn's being" might suggest the wind to be only the breath of Autumn, an ephemeral manifestation through which we may imperfectly know the ineffable



“being” that is Autumn, or we may see the phrase as a descriptive metaphor less redolent of hierarchical relational significance. In the “Hymn,” the first stanza presents the “awful shadow” as more the subject of our attention than the “unseen Power,” the distinction between the two, both “unseen” (at least as the *Examiner* version has it), being confused such that the referent of “Spirit of BEAUTY” in stanza two is itself indistinct. Such an effect enacts intellectual beauty’s “pass[ing] away” (16) in a manner foreshadowing the metapoetic effect of the “vale of tears” (17).

“Spirit of BEAUTY” may refer to the “awful shadow” – the spirit of the Power which is intellectual beauty – or to intellectual beauty itself (“spirit” as in “essence” or an anthropomorphic representation of the same). Equally, “of BEAUTY” may be read as an adjectival phrase, with its referent again either the spirit of the Power or the spirit of the shadow of the Power. “Shadow of Beauty!” (13), as the Scrope Davies notebook version has it,<sup>24</sup> leads us more clearly towards the latter interpretation, but the version brings complexities of its own which move us towards precisely the same twin effect of destabilising the distinction between Power and shadow on the one hand and implying a reversal in their relational hierarchy on the other. For example, line 71’s “O awful LOVELINESS” – as the *Examiner* version has it: the Scrope Davies notebook shows “O, awful Loveliness!” – resonates in just this way if read in light of the appointment of adjectives in the first line of the Scrope Davies notebook version: “The lovely shadow of some awful Power” (1). This is, in effect, a double assertion of the subsuming of existence into perception: the perceivable shadow’s adjective rather than the ineffable Power’s adjective is the one later transformed into the noun; and the

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<sup>24</sup> SMW, 117-19.

very act of adjective becoming noun in this context speaks of a breaking down of the distinction between sense perception and existence: the partial subsuming of ontology itself into epistemology mentioned earlier, with both the subsuming and the partialness of that subsuming held in a complex interchange within the poem, as they are in “Mont Blanc.”

Such ambiguities point up both the potential conflation and the potential distinctness of perception and reality, and at least flirt with the possible supremacy of the ineffable’s figural counterpart over the ineffable itself; similarly, the distinction between – and presumed hierarchical relation between – the poem and that which the poem seeks to convey is destabilised. Thus the destabilising of hierarchical relation I noted in Chapter One as being employed by Byron is also used by Shelley to generate meaning. With regard to the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” and “Ode to the West Wind,” each poem operates in an imaginative space which manages to hold idealism and scepticism equally; at the same time, Shelley points towards, without definitively affirming, language’s generative powers. However, what is being valorised is not language *per se*, nor the primacy of perception or the conflation of perception and existence *per se*: rather, it is language and the idealism-scepticism interaction as essentially mobile operations, and the poetic work as a place of instability.

### III

In the Introduction to this thesis I pointed towards Shelley’s comments in *Speculations on Metaphysics* on language’s potential calcification – for our words to be “dead” and “our thoughts cold and borrowed” – and the present chapter thus far has shown how Shelley’s poetic making, operating in the light of a qualified antipathy towards stasis

and inaction, draws attention to this potential whilst simultaneously co-opting such moments into vital interchanges. In his *A Refutation of Deism* a young Shelley, influenced by Lucretius and Holbach, expands on his view that “mind cannot create, it can only perceive,”<sup>25</sup> and whilst he would later come to repudiate materialism<sup>26</sup> as “a seducing system to young and superficial minds,”<sup>27</sup> we may glean much from his language:

Mind is the recipient of impressions made on the organs of sense, and without the action of external objects we should not only be deprived of all knowledge of the existence of mind, but totally incapable of the knowledge of any thing. It is evident therefore that mind deserves to be considered as the effect, rather than the cause of motion.<sup>28</sup>

Elsewhere he makes a similar point, and in both cases chooses “motion” when writing of the material universe: “it is said that mind produces motion; and it might as well have been said, that motion produces mind.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps influenced by contemporary debates on vitalism,<sup>30</sup> elsewhere in *A Refutation of Deism* Eusebes argues that “Matter,

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<sup>25</sup> *A Refutation of Deism*, CWS, vol. vi, 56.

<sup>26</sup> Though, as I. J. Kapstein notes, with regard to the specific notion that “mind cannot create, it can only perceive,” Shelley “clung to the idea with curious persistence, even when he turned from materialism to idealism.” I. J. Kapstein, “The Meaning of Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc,’” *PMLA* 62 (1947): 1046-60 (1051). It seems that Kapstein is correct: Shelley reproduces the phrase near-*verbatim* in “On Life” (*SMW*, 636), despite the essay’s contradictory content, and in a letter to Leigh Hunt of 27 September 1819, long after Shelley had proclaimed quite a different perspective. CWS, vol. x, 87.

<sup>27</sup> “On Life,” *SMW*, 634.

<sup>28</sup> *A Refutation of Deism*, CWS, vol. vi, 56.

<sup>29</sup> *Speculations on Metaphysics*, CWS, vol. vii, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Such debates were a crucial influence on Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*, a text in which Percy Shelley appears to have had significant involvement, with Charles E. Robinson arguing compellingly that Percy’s influence was not, as James Rieger suggests, “minor,” but rather that of “an able midwife” in the creation of the text, perhaps in the manner of modern “publishers’ editors,” with more than one word in twenty deriving from Percy’s hand. Charles E. Robinson, *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. The Frankenstein Notebooks. A Facsimile Edition of Mary Shelley’s Manuscript Novel, 1816-17 (with alterations in the hand of Percy Bysshe Shelley) as it survives in Draft and Fair Copy deposited by Lord Abinger in the Bodleian Library, Oxford* (2 vols., Garland: London, 1996), vol. i, lxxvii.

such as we behold it, is not inert. It is infinitely active and subtile.”<sup>31</sup> In *A Defence of Poetry* Shelley writes of the work of Dante:

His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought; and many yet lie covered in the ashes of their birth, and pregnant with a lightning which has yet found no conductor. All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially.<sup>32</sup>

Shelley is a poet of vitality, of mobility, the operations of mind and external universe equally mobile in themselves and in their intervolving: believing that “everything is in animation,”<sup>33</sup> he seeks to enact that belief through language, but he does so through engagement with its equal propensity to fix and deaden, seeking to hold in his writing its infinite potential.

I mentioned earlier the metrical liminality of “being” in the first line of the “Ode,” such that it feels half-assertive, half-cowed, the pushing against the corralling of its foot emphasised by the end-stop and the transference of emphasis to the “thou” at the start of line two. Simon Haines takes issue with the word “being,” asking whether it is “a meaningless reduplication, an assertion that Autumn’s being has being,” arguing that Shelley “must have meant one of two things .... Either ‘Autumn’s being’ is that metaphysical existence or reality, almost that Platonic Form, of which all the qualities or properties of Autumn ... partake ...; or it is a kind of intensified and concentrated autumn-quality or autumnness, induced from all empirically-known autumns.”<sup>34</sup> He does, I think, miss the point. The West Wind is, specifically, the “breath of Autumn’s

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<sup>31</sup> *A Refutation of Deism*, CWS, vol. vi, 50.

<sup>32</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, SMW, 693.

<sup>33</sup> *LPBS*, vol. i, 269.

<sup>34</sup> Haines, 154.

*being*” (my italics), of Autumn’s continuing state of existing, of being alive, resolutely vital and ongoing and unfixed, the repetition of “thou” with its trochaic inversion rippling down the line and emphasising the wind’s connection with that particular element of the metaphor. The wind is, as Wasserman puts it, “‘the breath of Autumn’s being’ both literally and in the sense that it is the soul of Autumn’s *active* existence”<sup>35</sup> (my italics) – it is the season’s essence, and that essence is the vital, the moving, “being” acting as a counterpoint to the propensity of the word “Autumn” to operate as a signifier doubly fixed: both conceived by the reader as signifying something fixed (not redolent of motion and process, and therefore at odds with a signified Shelley sees as all motion, all process); and fixed in our conception (“dead,” the product of thought “cold and borrowed,” devoid of the mobility of suggestiveness).

Similarly, in the first stanza of the “Hymn” it is neither Power nor shadow but the shadow’s “visiting” (2), the way in which “it visits” (6) which forms the subject of the similes, such that the thing-in-motion *is* the thing, defined by its movement and its activity, its visiting and its departing:

—visiting  
 This various world with as inconstant wing  
 As summer winds that creep from flower to flower.—  
 Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,  
   It visits with inconstant glance  
   Each human heart and countenance;  
 Like hues and harmonies of evening,—  
   Like clouds in starlight widely spread,—  
   Like memory of music fled,—  
   Like aught for all its grace may be  
 Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.  
 (2-12)

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<sup>35</sup> Wasserman, 239.

We feel this sense of “becoming-other”<sup>36</sup> throughout Shelley’s work, words shimmying from fixed meanings and relations whilst stopping short of total dissolution, often serving primary functions yet with an “inconstant glance” (6)<sup>37</sup> towards other functions which serve to destabilise potential fixity. The “whose” in the second line of the “Ode” and the “shower” of “Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower” (5) in the “Hymn” are cases in point. In the first of these, whilst “whose” must rightly be read as substitutive of the preceding “thou” (itself anaphorically substitutive of the “wild West Wind”) and as denoting the wind as possessor of the “unseen presence,” as we read we may feel it momentarily impelled to serve the arresting Aeolian resonance of the second clause, initiating the kind of subtle subordination of the “wind” to its own metaphor upon which we have already touched, until “the leaves dead / Are driven” (2-3) to resettle matters. Note, though, that this resettling is into an unsettling confusion of agency which the ripple of disturbance, like an unseen presence, has served to pre-empt. In the “Hymn,” “shower” is, as Leader & O’Neill note,<sup>38</sup> “a verb governed by ‘moonbeams’”: both Hogle<sup>39</sup> and Duncan Wu<sup>40</sup> are wrong to see it as part of a noun-phrase governing “visits.” Yet as we read we feel a temporary destabilising effect until the ambiguity is resolved, and as such, the word, balancing on its alexandrine, in flirting however briefly with solecism speaks of the “inconstant” and the “various,” and in our momentary semantic reorientation points to both the focus on process within process and the instability of the similes to come.

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<sup>36</sup> Hogle, 18.

<sup>37</sup> “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.”

<sup>38</sup> *SMW*, 720.

<sup>39</sup> Hogle, 63.

<sup>40</sup> Duncan Wu, *Romanticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1071n.

Shelley's comments in *A Defence of Poetry* on the "infinite" nature of "high poetry" contend that "veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed."<sup>41</sup> In the first stanza of the "Hymn" in his litany of "failed likenesses"<sup>42</sup> whose "terms of comparison seem peculiarly at odds with one another,"<sup>43</sup> Shelley's verse again succeeds in its failing, paradoxically approaching the defining ineffability of the "inmost naked beauty" through emphasising the impossibility of doing so, the "tenuously connected profusion"<sup>44</sup> of his similes a "series of natural signatures"<sup>45</sup> which "implicitly comment on their own figurativeness"<sup>46</sup> and thereby "underscore the extent to which the poem's subject defeats language."<sup>47</sup> As with the destabilising of the hierarchical relation between vehicle and tenor we noted in Byron, the specific operations of elements of analogy function in Shelley as a figurative metadialectic with its own semiotic potential.

Again, Shelley exploits the generative power of language's imperfection, here through a construction which is this imperfection writ large, its use of similarity relying also on a lack of sameness: as David Simpson rightly notes, "analogy is ... the appropriate mode of the preservation of the disjunction *within* the comparison"<sup>48</sup> – a generative property which Byron is also and in different ways adept at utilising – and, as Karen Weisman suggests, in using similes here rather than "the absolute equivalents of

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<sup>41</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, SMW, 693.

<sup>42</sup> Forest Pyle, "'Frail Spells': Shelley and the Ironies of Exile," *SPP*, 666.

<sup>43</sup> Carol Jacobs, "On Looking at Shelley's Medusa," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 163-79 (171).

<sup>44</sup> Bloom, 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. Writing here of the "Hymn," Bloom's term might be equally applied to the "Ode."

<sup>46</sup> O'Neill, 35.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 158.

metaphor,” Shelley “refuses the presumption of surely locating his spiritual anchor even while he advertises the frenetic quality of his urge to do so.”<sup>49</sup>

The use of simile here, and specifically multiple similes, disavows the Kantian conception of analogy as “not, as the word is commonly taken, an imperfect similarity of two things, but a perfect similarity of two relations between quite dissimilar things”:<sup>50</sup> Shelley not only allows both Kantian disjunctions to stand, presenting the *imperfect* similarity of two relations between quite dissimilar things, but emphasises the disjunction in both the similes’ very accretion and the recourse to the near-tautology of “like aught that for its grace may be / Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery” (11-12). This might best be characterised as a Pyrrhic surrender: the “like” of the Shelleyan simile serves to hold equally within its meaning both “not the same as” and “similar to,” and in doing so realises the potential of analogical language to “bring out the *activity* of making connections,”<sup>51</sup> allowing neither the figurative element nor its subject to become fixed in their own meaning or their relation, the profusion of similes appropriate, as Bloom notes, “because the single metaphor could not fit the evanescent nature of the phenomenon that is the poem’s theme.”<sup>52</sup> As Simpson puts it, “Shelley’s point is that nothing ‘is’, though everything is ‘like’.”<sup>53</sup>

The activity of relation proves the vital element in the nature of things: definition in relational terms becomes in Shelley’s hands, as it does in Byron’s, more than a

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<sup>49</sup> Karen Weisman, “The Lyricist,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, 45-64, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. L. W. Beck (London, 1950), 125.

<sup>51</sup> Simpson, *Irony and Authority*, 158.

<sup>52</sup> Bloom, 37.

<sup>53</sup> Simpson, *Irony and Authority*, 163.



Derridean endless “dispossess[ion] of the longed-for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it”<sup>54</sup> precisely by dint of the poet’s mindfulness of its potential to be just that. The similes’ “facile reliance on alliterative links”<sup>55</sup> flirts self-consciously with the potential nihilism of endless signification whilst allowing the reader’s metapoetic awareness of these failed constructs *as* failed constructs to make meaning, in a similar way to the aforementioned operations of our response to the “vale of tears” (17). Intellectual beauty’s ineffability is thus emphasised: that is to say, its nature as “a vision whose reality is, and can only be, embodied in a chain of metaphors.”<sup>56</sup> In a later simile Shelley describes intellectual beauty as “nourishment” “to human thought” “like darkness to a dying flame” (44-45). The simile operates in a space between idealism and scepticism that has something in common with a Lockean dualism, admitting as it does the existence of matter yet according supremacy of significance to relational sense perception: the nourishment given operates entirely on perception and specifically on relational terms, to the extent that relation is constitutive of actuality; the nature of things is their relation to other things. Shelley is acutely aware of the delicacy of this position: when at the end of the poem he writes of the “spells” (83) of the intellectual beauty to which he has “dedicate[d] [his] powers” (61) he points up the potential similarity with the “uttered charm” of the “frail spells” (29) of stanza three, acknowledging that the poem is an act of faith which is all the more so because of its doubtfulness. The poem does not just speak of the notion of reciprocally-generative interrelation but is a product of it and thus a testament to it:

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<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 141.

<sup>55</sup> O’Neill, 36.

<sup>56</sup> Bloom, 37.

always hovering in the air is the sense that intellectual beauty constructs Shelley's verse which constructs intellectual beauty in its turn.

If the vitality of Shelley's verse lies in motion then its agent is agency itself, and with the "Ode" we feel in the operations of agency a similar reciprocity to that found in the "Hymn." There is something of the "frail spell" (29)<sup>57</sup> about the illocution of the "incantation of this verse" (65), a calling upon as a calling up, invocation as evocation: the poem is a "quicken[ing]" (64) in verse of the vehicle which will "drive" his verse "over the universe" (64) to quicken in its turn. Within the extended subordination of the vocative calls of the first three stanzas we see transmutations abound, proleptic of a vying for and relinquishment of agency between poet and eponymous subject which transmutes through the process of "mutual making"<sup>58</sup> into a complex intervolving of identity. In the opening tercet both the wind and its sometime-metaphor find themselves disenfranchised despite their bluster: for all the "elemental ferocity"<sup>59</sup> of the lines and "the sense of being in the midst of the thing described,"<sup>60</sup> the agency driving the leaves is, as James Chandler puts it, "left ... up in the air."<sup>61</sup> Yet this agency, in contrast with the "azure sister of the Spring" (9) "driving sweet buds" (11) is, itself, subtly and paradoxically disenfranchised, with the phrase "the leaves dead / Are driven" (2-3) denoting its activity to be, grammatically at least, passive, the active passivity sometimes to be found in Shelley's work<sup>62</sup> counterpointed here by passive

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<sup>57</sup> "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty."

<sup>58</sup> James Chandler, "History's Lyre: The 'West Wind' and the Poet's Work," *SPP*, 711-21, 718.

<sup>59</sup> Bloom, 67.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>61</sup> Chandler, "History's Lyre," *SPP*, 712.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Shelley's early poem on the battle of Austerlitz in which, unlike "restless" (21) Buonaparte, the "Coward Chiefs" (1) of Russia and Austria are "calm and still / Keen frosts that blight the human bud / Each opening petal blight and kill / And bathe its tenderness in blood" (11-14). The malevolent secret ministry of the emperors' passivity is described in active terms, a sense heightened

activity. The reflexive impetuosity of the final stanza's "be thou me, impetuous one!" (62) forms part of the transmutation of poet into subject and *vice versa* such that each is both subject and metaphor for the other. The ambiguity of agency and even status as verb or noun in the final tercet's "trumpet of a prophecy" (69) mirrors the tussling intervolving of the wind and its metaphor in the first line, here ultimate agency seeming to rest with neither poet nor subject but, ambiguously, pointing outwards towards the reader – with the final line's interrogative, it trembles at the poem's lip.

This final complex mobility of signification is part of the wider mobility of suggestiveness in the poem. The propensity for "element[s] [to] become the metaphorical vehicle for each other"<sup>63</sup> and the kind of elemental synaesthesia we see in lines such as "the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean" (17) – "tangled because Heaven and Ocean intermingle,"<sup>64</sup> as Bloom rightly says – not only form part of the endless transmutation and flight from linguistic and relational fixity we have noted elsewhere, but form a specific imagistic concomitant to the operations of complex, multilayered similes, metaphors and subordinate clauses of the kind we found in the "Hymn" and we see here. In stanza two, for example, we see "thou" (23) taking us to "to which" (24) which leads to "from whose" (27) by way of clauses fecund with imagery: like a Byronic digression they resist their subordination and either forge new relational paths or move to usurp their subject. In this poem, in the "Hymn," and in different ways across Shelley's oeuvre, they enact both the generative nature of

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by the minimal punctuation of the Esdaile Notebook. "To the Emperors of Russia and Austria Who Eyed the Battle of Austerlitz from the Heights whilst Buonaparte Was Active in the Thickest of the Fight," Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Esdaile Notebook: A Volume of Early Poems*, ed. Kenneth Neill Cameron (New York: Knopf, 1964), 48-49, 48.

<sup>63</sup> Timothy Morton, "Nature and Culture," *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, 185-207, 193.

<sup>64</sup> Bloom, 80.

language and Shelley's doubtful faith in sense perception's claims to a reality which, for Shelley, is constitutive of motion. The subordination of figural vehicles is, in Shelley's hands, always in doubt, the perceived object of reflection in language often giving way to "the wave's intenser day" (34) as hierarchical relation is subverted in states' relations with other states.

#### IV

As alluded to in the Introduction, in the Preface to the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* Shelley tells us that "Mont Blanc" was "composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe" and is "an undisciplined overflowing of the soul";<sup>65</sup> in doing so he appears to accord with Wordsworth's description of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" whilst rejecting what Wordsworth chose to add – that "it [poetry] takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquillity."<sup>66</sup> The "undisciplined overflowing" Shelley seeks to present appears to eschew the mediating process advocated by Wordsworth, by which "the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced."<sup>67</sup> Wordsworth leaves unsaid the role of nature as stimulus, whereas in the Preface Shelley hints, with characteristic equivocation, at the primacy of nature as the wellspring of poetic creation but one which enacts an "unremitting interchange" (39) with the mind, with "deep and powerful feelings" having an active role whose activity is nevertheless catalysed and

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<sup>65</sup> *SMW*, 721

<sup>66</sup> *WMW*, 611

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 611

“excited by” the “objects” of nature. In further suggesting that the poem “rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang,”<sup>68</sup> a subtilized and qualified accordance of mutual agency is suggested, the energy of “sprang” arguably both accentuated and ameliorated by the preceding preposition: “those feelings” are accorded energy in their breaking out, but they are simultaneously defined in relation to their origin.

A year earlier, in a letter to Peacock of July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1816, Shelley recounts the trip that inspired the poem:

I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness—And remember this was all one scene. It all pressed home to our regard & to our imagination. ... All was as much our own as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others, as now occupied our own.—Nature was the poet whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest.<sup>69</sup>

The recollection manages to conflate reciprocation between mind and nature and the predominance of nature, and it manages to conflate discreteness and conflation itself – that is to say, not simply an interchange between mind and nature, but additionally an interchange between mind and nature as separate entities and mind and nature as one, or as entities equally constitutive of overall experience.

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<sup>68</sup> *SMW*, 721

<sup>69</sup> *LPBS*, vol. i, 496-97.

In the perpetual Orphic song of this poem, Shelley's exploration is of neither nature nor the "human mind" but the complex mobility of their interaction: "thoughts and forms" saved, or half-saved, from "senseless[ness]" and "shapeless[ness]" through their reciprocating "throng," with the poem standing not just as a depiction in language of this interaction, but in the subtleties of its linguistic and poetic operations an enactment of that interaction:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume ...  
(1-7)

Kenneth Neill Cameron notes that there are different views in relation to these lines:

... some critics consider the "human mind" to be the basic entity; others, the "universe of things." According to the first group, Shelley is maintaining that the universe is a passive "flow" and the significant element in the mind-matter relationship is added by the mind. The universe is like a "feeble brook" which increases its sound by echoing and blending with the sound of a "vast river" and other natural objects. According to the second group, the human mind is the "feeble brook" and the surrounding scene which it echoes is the universe.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years*, 244.

Cameron is right to describe these two prevailing perspectives on the poem, each with their own “exponents,” as he rightly calls them. However, what such binary interpretations risk is a mode of interpretation which involves a paring away of the vitalising ambiguities which are constitutive of the Shelleyan poem. The stanza’s subject – its “basic entity” – is neither human mind nor universe of things but complex congress. Thus whilst, for example, Tilottama Rajan’s conception of the poem as depicting “the mind’s attempt to idealise life”<sup>71</sup> is a valuable one, the poem is more than this, and much is lost in defining its nature within such bounds. Yet this does form part of what the poem is, and whilst the infinitive mobility of poetic creation is given a greater degree of rein than it might in other poets’ work, it is not unreined, nor does it unqualifiedly reign: the Shelleyan poem is not a deconstructionist dance of untrammelled signification, nor is it quite the boundless and limitless process of “radical transference” explored by Jerrold Hogle,<sup>72</sup> and Rajan’s description of the poem as a whole and the two interpretative stances on the first section expounded by Cameron above are, in their potential fixities, as contributory to the poem as that which seeks to make that fixity remain potential only.

As with Byron in the opening cantos of *Childe Harold*, the mobile interplays at work in Shelley’s lyrics are more multiple than we might initially think; in the case of “Mont Blanc,” the potential concretisation is both between the valorisation of the universe of things or the human mind as of greater importance than the other, and also between the two entities *as* two entities or as one. However, again as with *Childe Harold*,

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<sup>71</sup> Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980), 85.

<sup>72</sup> Hogle, *passim*. I take the term “radical transference” from the subtitle to Hogle’s work.

openness to such multidirectionality of mobility only takes us so far if we fail to accede to the degree of performative subtlety with which these mobilities are enacted, with both poets suffering from critics' reluctance to embrace the possibility of such subtlety. It might be said that the poem shifts from discreteness to unity and to discreteness again in broad terms, just as there is a case to be made for a movement from an emphasis on the universe of things early in the poem towards an albeit heavily-qualified focus on the human mind's imaginings towards its close; however, I would suggest that the subtleties of the poem's operations are slightly ill-served by the broad sweeps implied in such assertions. What the poem is enacting is implicative, accentual, the deft shadings of a reflective object turning in the light, which only opens itself up to us if we see beyond our preconceptions of what the Shelleyan poem is and does.

The poem's opening lines ostensibly explore the intervolving harmony between imagination and nature, yet we find that line three's "—now glittering—now reflecting" arrests the "flow" of the "everlasting universe of things," as if after announcing with enjambed majesty the mind's passivity Shelley feels compelled to emphasise its reciprocating agency; "the intermingling of mind and perception"<sup>73</sup> is pointed towards, yet the mind, in the assertion of its double caesura, whispers of apprehension. Here I refer to the version published in the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*: whilst both caesurae remain, the punctuation is less heavy in the Scrope Davies notebook version,<sup>74</sup> the whisper less strong ("now dark, now glittering; now reflecting" (3)). Similarly, "with a sound but half its own" serves to conflate mind and nature through their twin claims as referent to "its" in a manner more grammatically

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<sup>73</sup> Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years*, 251.

<sup>74</sup> *SMW*, 124-27.



disconcerting than ontologically harmonising, whilst leaving the very value of discrete valence questionable: whether “its” relates to “the everlasting universe of things” or “the source of human thought,” do we read “a sound but half its own” as expressive of a welcome bolstering or an “[en]feeb[ing]” subsuming of strength? The answer is, I think, that we read the phrase as deliberately vacillating between the two, just as any debate over the referent of the “its” of line six may be said to miss the point if it fails to acknowledge the meaning-making propensities of the ambiguity itself.

The earlier Scrope Davies notebook version reads “a sound not all its own” (6), suggestive of a less substantial change wrought by the intervening, but subject to the same ambivalence regarding its bolstering or subsuming effect. Both this variation and the aforementioned weakened caesurae of line three serve to suggest that Shelley has, in the later version, moved to ameliorate suggestions of certainty – a view which accords with a number of the observations made by Michael O’Neill in his assessment of the two versions, such as the switch from “simple” to “solemn” as a descriptor of “faith” later in the poem.<sup>75</sup> O’Neill and Chernaik and Burnett have shown that there are differences in the subtle operations of both versions; I would suggest that the later version not only ameliorates suggestions of certainty but is more *formally* subtilized in the expression of those uncertainties, the poem acceding to its own form’s capacity for expression, with one example being the aforementioned use of the enjambed ending to line 28:

... the strange sleep

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<sup>75</sup> Michael O’Neill, “Shelley’s Lyric Art,” *SPP*, 619. The lines in question are 77-78 and 78-79 in the *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* and the Scrope Davies notebook versions respectively.

Which when the voices of the desert fail  
Wraps all in its own deep eternity;—  
(27-9)

The subtle *formal* effect noted by O'Neill, which as we have seen accords with both Keach's observations regarding enjambed endings in Shelley and my own observations regarding line one of the "Hymn" and line two of the "Ode," does much of the work of the *language* in the corresponding lines from the Scrope Davies notebook version, with the two subsequently removed lines (28 and 30) from the Scrope Davies version bringing the "blend of energy and forlornness" I have said O'Neill rightly notes in the enjambed ending of "fail" as it interacts with "wraps" in the published version, but the earlier version does so without the same subtlety or affective tactility:

... even the sleep  
The sudden pause that does inhabit thee  
Which when the voices of the desert fail  
And its hues wane, doth blend them all and steep  
Their period in its own eternity;  
(27-31)<sup>76</sup>

Thus not only is certainty ameliorated in the later version but the utilisation of formal effects in ameliorating that certainly is increased.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Scrope Davies notebook version.

<sup>77</sup> In *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* as originally published, the enjambment's "subtly disjunctive" effect is heightened by "fail" falling on the verso and "Wraps" on the recto of the volume (Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817; Oxford: Woodstock, 1989), 173-183; 176-7). Whether this is a deliberate effect, either by author or compositor, is open to debate – see Michael O'Neill's discussion, in *CPS*, vol. iii, 300-301, of the possible imperatives, practical and otherwise, attendant on the poem's presentation within the volume – but we might note, firstly, that the potential significance of layout in Shelley's published volumes has garnered some critical attention (see, for

Ambiguities abound within the poem. As several critics have noted, often “the referents of Shelley’s pronouns are elusive”<sup>78</sup> – and yet whilst critics and editors have often sought to pin these down, and some critics have characterised such ambiguity as a deficiency in Shelley’s writing, few have remained open to such ambiguities as elements in a performative metatextuality which confers its own meaning, and in doing so provides an apt vehicle for the delicacy of the poet’s feelings. We see further suggestion of the poet’s “doubtful belief”<sup>79</sup> (to use Hogle’s apposite phrase) where the “one legion of wild thoughts” (41) and the “Power” (16) meet:

In the still cave of the witch Poesy,  
 Seeking among the shadows that pass by,  
 Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,  
 Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast  
 From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!  
 (44-48)

One reading of these lines might be that the “ghosts,” “shade,” “phantom” and “image” seem to emanate from the “breast / From which they fled” – that is to say, the “thou”; the “Power” – with the “one legion of wild thoughts” “seeking” them “among the

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example, Kyle Grimes, “Private Visions/Public Responsibilities: The *Alastor* Volume,” in *A Brighter Morn: The Shelley Circle’s Utopian Project*, ed. Darby Lewes (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 63-80); secondly, that Keach has written compellingly on Shelley’s placement of words relating to empty space “at the ends of unstopped lines so that the blank space of the page could visually accentuate their meaning” (Keach, *Shelley’s Style*, 167), suggesting an awareness which may extend beyond line endings to page endings; and thirdly, that presentation of the poem within *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour*, most notably from recto to overleaf verso, does appear to visually facilitate moments at which enjambment’s paradoxical potential for subtle hiatus has semiotic potential: “all living things that dwell / Within the daedal earth” (179-80) and “The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever / Rolls its loud waters to the ocean waves” (181-8) seem to me to be two notable examples.

<sup>78</sup> *SMW*, 722

<sup>79</sup> Hogle, 79.

shadows,” i.e. seeking signs of the Power, which then reveals itself. Bloom, however, sees Shelley’s “wild thoughts” as “seeking,” bodying forth imaginatively, the ghosts *et al.*, then “recall[ing]” them to Shelley’s breast, at which point the Power appears.<sup>80</sup> Ostensibly, there are reasons to call Bloom’s interpretation into question: “breast” would seem an unlikely lexical choice as the seat of the imaginative faculty; “fled” fits neither reading perfectly, but perhaps adheres more readily to the fast-flowing movement of the Power’s emanations at the start of the stanza; Shelley writes around the same time of “memory of music fled” (10) in the “Hymn,” and it seems unlikely that he would use the term to describe generative mental process when he had recently used it to describe a degenerative one; and “seeking” seems unlikely to be used to mean “imagining.” Yet each of these may be countered. Whilst I think the view, mentioned in the Introduction that “all Shelley’s thoughts are feelings”<sup>81</sup> is an oversimplification, within Shelley’s poetic making delineations between intellect, imagination, emotion and linguistic articulation are subtilized and performatively interrogated such that there is arguably an aptness in the emanation of “thoughts” from the “breast.” “Fled” both emphasises the “wild[ness]” of the “thoughts” and accords them their own impulsive agency beyond the influence of their seat in the “human mind.” “Memory of music fled” in the “Hymn” is only degenerative if we take the view that the entropic dissipation of the human mind’s grasp is itself a degenerative act, when in fact much of our discussion of Shelley’s poetry has found the mobility of the half-graspable to be poetically generative. And to body forth imaginatively as an act of “seeking” arguably expresses well the “interchange” between the “human mind” and the phenomenal world which is part of the poem’s explorations.

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<sup>80</sup> Bloom, 29-30.

<sup>81</sup> *SCH*, 11; 72.

Yet suggesting the primacy of one reading over another is not to deny another reading's role as one dimension of the poem's performative capacities, and crucially, nor is it to deny the semiotic potential of the very existence of multiple interpretations. Particularly from line 34 ("Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee") to the end of stanza two, the poem both *is* a process of complex construction and is *aware* of its engagement in a process of complex construction. To say simply that the subject of this part of the stanza is the "unremitting interchange" which takes place "in the still cave of the witch Poesy" is at once to acknowledge its necessary complexity and at the same time to slightly misrepresent these fourteen lines: they are complex and open to multiple interpretations because they are about something complex, but this is only half the story. The lines are about what they simultaneously are, and they are what they are simultaneously about. They are complex in that they are about the interaction within the still cave of the witch Poesy; they are subtle because they *are* the still cave of the witch Poesy: the poem is not just the expression of these interactions but the crucible in which the interactions are occurring. Both what the lines are about and what they are is imperfectly rendered – as all linguistic articulation will be – and this imperfection in rendering is also what they both are about and are. The shift in the weighting of communicativeness from lexical semantics to the meaning-making propensities of formal operations which we have noted between the earlier and later versions is arguably a shift towards a more immersive (though vitalisingly and reflexively not fully immersive) poetic embodiment of the poetic process, as is arguably denoted by Shelley's movement from feeling himself to be "near" (45) the still cave in the Scrope Davies notebook version to being "in" (44) it in the version published in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*.

## V

We might rightly ask where all this leaves us, and where it leaves Shelley's "Mont Blanc." If we acknowledge the wider meaning-making potential of the very existence of multiple modes of interpretation as constitutive of Shelley's conflicting feelings regarding the relationship between nature and the human mind, it is possible to extrapolate from this that the poem as a whole is an enactment of an equable holding of the two as having no primacy of one over the other, and also an enactment of an equable holding of the two as on the one hand discrete and on the other hand subsumed the one into the other. Yet to do so may, as paradoxical as it may seem, be to move towards an unfairly binary apprehension, albeit a different form of binary apprehension than the ones I have outlined as being displayed in some previous Shelleyan criticism. In this case it would be that, having acknowledged the subtilizing effects of the poem's performative operations, we move to suggest that not only is all subtilized, all equivocated, but also that there is nothing being said, nothing meant: a proliferation of unstratified perspectives, a kind of perspectival as well as linguistic deconstructionism, *ideas* operating in the way in which many early critics felt Shelley's *imagery* operated, a dazzling proliferation dancing from one to the other which, if we try to articulate it, leaves us "invoking an absence of something."<sup>82</sup>

To do so, however, would be to misrepresent the poem, in part because it misses three further questions to be asked. The first is how Shelley *feels* about the possibilities of interrelation (or otherwise) explored in the poem – that is to say, having presented

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<sup>82</sup> *Revaluation*, 173.

these possibilities of interrelation (or otherwise), what is his response to them. The second is how he feels about those feelings: how he feels about his own response to the interrelations. The third is how both of these might be performatively expressed within the poem. I began the chapter exploring the expression of Shelley's doubtful faith as enacted in the opening to the "Hymn," and have noted Hogle's use of the term "doubtful belief" in relation to Shelley, and the question remains as to the relative strength of those phrases' constituent elements: in the tussle between faith and doubt, where does Shelley's desire – his hope and aspiration – lie.

Let us return to interpretations of the lines concerning "the witch Poesy." In a reading such as Bloom's, it is the lack of passivity which hinders communion, the "wild thoughts" failing to attain something akin to a Negative Capability, the Power only revealing itself when the images are "recall[ed]"; in the other postulated reading, the poet conceives of a situation in which communion comes from active – that is to say, self-acknowledged – "seeking." Thus for Bloom we have a doubtful Shelley struggling to accede to aspiration's necessary if paradoxical passivity; in the other reading, the poet conceives of a situation in which active "seeking" brings communion. What we have is a poem which appears to performatively enact an unremitting interchange between the two, and consequently the reader's experience of the poem encompasses not only the poem's broad concern with the vital indeterminacy of the interrelation between elements, but also more specifically the poet's own feelings towards the nature of that interrelation – feelings which themselves are performatively enacted within the poem as vitally indeterminate.

“Mont Blanc” concludes as follows:

The secret strength of things,  
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!  
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind’s imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

(139-44)

The “thou” of line 142 appears to refer to the physical mountain rather than to Mont Blanc as synecdochical of Nature’s works or the Power itself; nevertheless, the indispensability of the “human mind’s imaginings” and the sense that “the centre of power is located in man himself”<sup>83</sup> appears to be asserted. But is this a powerful assertion of the imagination by an aspiring Shelley free of doubt taking his place in a harmonised world in which “consciousness and its environment lock together in an uncertain and shifting embrace,”<sup>84</sup> or is its unexpected stridency an essentially defensive assertiveness: a preservation instinct rearing itself against the concomitant potential for annihilation of the self?

The answer, if such a thing can be answered, is perhaps to return to the observation made at the start of the present chapter: that Shelley’s lines often live in the crucible of their preclusion – that is to say, that the poem does not so much allow both interpretations as both allow and deny them at once, daedally generating alternative

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<sup>83</sup> Webb, 138.

<sup>84</sup> Merle A. Williams, “Contemplating Facts, Studying Ourselves: Aspects of Shelley’s Philosophical and Religious Prose,” *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, eds. Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 199-220, 203.



routes and shades of meaning which are not quite held and not quite dismissed, or held loosely and dismissed such that the echo of their possibility remains. One of the things with which the poem engages – in a negotiatory and performative exploration of separation and unity, subsumation and distinctness, and relational hierarchy – is its own self: with the poem as the same thing and not the same thing as its language, thoughts, feelings and the world or an aspect of the world, such that thinking of the poem as an *expression* or *depiction* of thoughts, feelings or the world or an aspect of the world through language seems to fall short.

What is perhaps particularly true, or more manifestly and demonstrably true, of “Mont Blanc” is to some degree true of many of Shelley’s poems, including the “Hymn” and the “Ode.” This is that to describe the poem as an *expression of or depiction through language of* the world itself or an aspect of it, or Shelley’s thoughts and feelings, or Shelley’s thoughts and feelings about and knowledge of the world itself or an aspect of it, would be less accurate, or at least more reductive, than it would be to describe it as a form of feeling and knowing. That is to say, it would be more accurate to see the poem as *being* something rather than enacting or depicting something, or to be a *striving towards* being something rather than enacting or depicting something. More accurate still, perhaps, would be to describe the poem as at once a form of feeling and knowing, an enactment of forms of feeling and knowing, and an exploration of forms of feeling and knowing, each rendered imperfectly and engaging with that imperfect engagement: the poem at once being something and enacting or depicting something, and engaging within itself with that dual nature. The differences between these ways of conceiving the poem, or ways of conceiving some constitutive elements of the poem, cannot be sharply delineated and in any case operate dialogically, but they are

to do with degrees of separation, of distance, of difference and of self-consciousness. The poem as a performative space in which reflexivity – expressed by formal subtleties as well as purely lexical means – ebbs and flows, and is by turns suppressed and pointed up, to the extent that one of the things which the poem might be said to both be and be about is the poet's and the poem's relationship with reflexivity: with his and its own self-awareness.

Where Leavis sees a poet with “a notable lack of self-knowledge,”<sup>85</sup> I see a poet with an acute awareness of both the limits of one's self-knowledge and the limits of self-knowledge as a consummation devoutly to be wished; and where Leavis sees a poet with a “weak grasp upon the actual,”<sup>86</sup> someone with “a mind ... little able to hold an object in front of it,”<sup>87</sup> I see a poet aware of the deleterious effects of holding too strongly and of the affective power of judicious relinquishment, just as I see a poet with an awareness of both the limits of language and the limits, in poetic terms, of what might be afforded by language's perfectibility.

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<sup>85</sup> *Revaluation*, 184.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

## CHAPTER THREE

### “Gleams Along the Wave”:

#### Water and Ruin in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos I and II

##### I

If, as suggested in Chapter One, we view the opening cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as an embryonic work in the poet's acknowledgement and enactment of the fallaciousness of destination, we see more clearly that its vitality lies in its combination of simultaneous tenacity and attenuation of association, its power lying in the success of its failures (as conventionally perceived). Byron's use of water is key to this vitality, though its use is complex, at times seemingly contradictory, and proliferates in unusual and audacious directions.

Water is ostensibly employed, naturally enough, to connote flux, destabilisation, and freedom from physical and metaphorical strictures. Yet there is equivocation, not only in the flight to water and the success of such flight, but also in water's very mobility. In keeping with the multidirectionality of Byronic instability, the amelioration of water's mobility operates alongside an amelioration of the material object's fixity. Connected with this, physiological and topographical interactions occur which compromise the separation of body and place, and we find a further mobility in Byron's contemplation of ruins and their nature as a positively ruined place – as a *felix culpa* – which itself accords with, and is perhaps in its ekphrastic self-reflexivity a metonym for, Byron's attitude to both life and literature, the effervescent vibrancy of world and text lying in its imperfections (again, as conventionally perceived). With

perfection – with wholeness, completion, destination – comes stasis and a calcification into meaninglessness. Thus his finished works seek to hold their unfinishedness at their core.

Byron's cantos destabilise the distinction between the poet-figure creating and the physical world created. The conceit, described in Chapter One, of the human skull described architecturally is part of a pattern which fuses architecture, topography, the human form and the human mind. This motif runs through all four cantos: in canto IV "Italia! oh Italia!" (IV. 42: 370)<sup>1</sup> is personified as having a "sweet brow" upon which "is sorrow plough'd by shame" (IV. 42: 373), the verb enacting the kind of destabilising of vehicle and tenor we have encountered before; in that canto's closing stanzas, the poet comments to Ocean that "Time writes no wrinkle on thine azure brow" (IV. 182: 1637); and in his description of the Colosseum Byron describes "the garland-forest, which the gray walls wear, / Like laurels on the bald first Caesar's head" (IV. 144: 1292-93). Often, Byron's close descriptions of the physical form have a topographical feel – "Smiles form the channel of a future tear" (II. 97: 916), for example – and when Byron personifies elements of the natural world, he is happy to press analogies beyond their conventional limits: of Nature herself, "fairest in her features wild," the poet asks "From her bare bosom let me take my fill, / Her never-wean'd, though not her favour'd child" (II. 37: 327-29), the analogy self-consciously strained in a way which suggests that the poet feels the trope of Nature as a personified female form a little more keenly, and perhaps a little less rhetorically, than most. For all Byron's valorisation of actually being there as opposed to conjuring depictions

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical canto, stanza and line numbers in this chapter refer to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, unless stated otherwise.

from the mind's eye, the world he presents is very much a world whose colours and contours, land and sea, are the product of a particular psyche.

Byron is mistrustful of both stasis and system; in water, he finds a substance and a motif which promises, at least, to be antithetical to both. In Chapter One, the shifts we noted from the Spenserian stanza had a watery verb attached to the notion of spontaneity: his "last 'Good Night'" is "with untaught melody" "*pour'd*" (I. 13: 111; 117), his later "unpremeditated lay" "*pour'd* forth" (I. 84: 835) (my italics). From the "vaunted rill" and "feeble fountain" (I. 1: 7) of the first stanza of canto I, to the "full reckless ... flow" (II. 98: 924) of time in the final lines of canto II, water is ubiquitous both as physical presence and figurative conceit.

Water, and the objects with which it interacts, function as exemplars of a Byronic multidirectional destabilisation which, like the essayings of the Shelleyan lyrics explored in Chapter Two, simultaneously eschews fixed positions whilst engaging with the potential fixity of the poetic product. In the cantos' use of water Byron appears to be searching for a poetic vehicle for the loosely-held instability of his outlook and poetic making, something which ultimately finds its imagistic corollary in Byron's treatment of depictions of ruination. The cantos' "protracted and persistent struggle for a form"<sup>2</sup> co-opts both water and ruination in its expression even as both images at once address and complicate any "fundamental consistency of ... vision"<sup>3</sup> on which the poem might settle.

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<sup>2</sup> Gleckner, 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 41.

## II

References to water often emphasise its mobility: the waterfalls are “foaming” (II. 25: 223), as is the brine (I. “last ‘Good night’” 10: 191), breakers “roar” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 1: 120), Tagus “dash[es] onward” (I. 14: 203), Guadiana “rolls his power along / In sullen billows, murmuring and vast” (I. 34: 379-80), the fosse “o’er-flow[s]” (I. 51: 535), waves are “rippling” (I. 33: 373) and “dancing” (II. 21: 182). In canto II Byron presents an impassioned paean to the seafaring life across several stanzas, and whilst the flight from a sense of melancholic loss will not hold long beyond the setting of the sun, there is genuine pleasure in the description:

He that hath sail’d upon the dark blue sea,  
Has view’d at times, I ween, a full fair sight;  
When the fresh breeze is fair as breeze may be,  
The white sail set, the gallant frigate tight;  
Masts, spires, and strand retiring to the right,  
The glorious main expanding o’er the bow,  
The convoy spread like wild swans in their flight,  
The dullest sailor wearing bravely now,  
So gaily curl the waves before each dashing prow.  
(II. 17: 145-53)

Here again, mobility is emphasised through the simile and the active verbs, the main “expanding,” the prow “dashing”; as the stanzas progress and “the moon is up” (II. 21: 181), mobility is heaped upon mobility: “Long streams of light” “expand” over waves that are themselves “dancing” (II. 21: 182). Water’s mobile propensity is a source of ease, of freedom from restriction, to the extent that movement’s absence is notably stressful: in the doldrums of becalmed waves, ships are personified as

“loitering pensive on the willing seas” (II. 20: 179). Such mobility is emphasised in descriptions of liquid generally (“the crimson torrent” “stream[ing] from [the] flank” of the injured bull (I. 76: 762)), and in figurative descriptions (the “flow” of “life’s warm stream” (I. 80: 800), and the simultaneously Keatsian and classical “Full from the fount of Joy’s delicious springs / Some bitter o’er the flowers its bubbling venom flings” (I. 82: 817-18)).

Yet for all this, the relationship between water and motion is less straightforward, the relationship between water and poet-narrator more equivocal. Firstly, not only is water not always moving, but its stillness is not always decried: at Cintra Byron describes “the tender azure of the unruffled deep” (I. 19: 247), and on the Ambracian Gulf “the weary waves retire to gleam at rest” (II. 70: 623), the winds which “come lightly whispering from the west” described as “kissing, not ruffling, the blue deep’s serene” (II. 70: 626-27). Personified water does not always seek movement: the wind-becalmed “willing seas” might be contrasted to the “brine” of a few stanzas earlier, laudably “long-reluctant” (II. 11: 99) in the transportation of “Athena’s poor remains” (II. 12:105), its role in the removal of the Elgin marbles a source, for Byron, of deep lament. When sailors are “coop’d in their winged sea-girt citadel” (II. 28: 249), the contrasting “coop’d” and “winged” speaks of the complexity of water’s associations as a potential source of both freedom and restriction. In the stanza quoted above, we should not ignore the double qualification of “has view’d at times, I ween” (II. 17: 146), and Byron’s customary deixis with “the dullest sailor wearing bravely now” (II. 17: 152), drawing attention as both do to the temporariness of this state, to the fact that things are often otherwise, such that we are not surprised when the winds fall and frustration sets in.

The placement of these stanzas within the canto adds significance to the description's equivocal touches and its dissolution into introspection. As the canto begins, general lamentation for the loss of the halcyon days of "august Athena" (II. 2: 10) narrows to the particular as, like Hamlet in his graveyard, a single skull becomes the focus of attention; ruminations on mortality, ruination and loss are particularised further as Byron writes elegiacally of John Edleston before moving via the plunder of the Elgin marbles to further lament for Greece's fall (II. 2-15: 10-135), until the poet-narrator asks, abruptly, "But where is Harold? Shall I then forget / To urge the gloomy wanderer o'er the wave?" (II. 16: 136-37). The answer to "shall I then forget?" is, we find, in the affirmative, as Harold's leave-taking of "the land of war and crimes" (II. 16: 144) is indeed forgotten as the poem moves not to a specific description of his journey, but to a general description of the "full fair sight" of sea-travel at its most attractive, which may "at times" be "view'd," the poet-narrator "ween[s]" (II. 17: 146).

It is significant that after allowing himself once again to shrug off the intermittently-felt narrative imperative and move to abstract idealised description, this "exhilarating portrait of life on board a 'gallant frigate'"<sup>4</sup> is so fragile and beset with qualification. The verve of "the glorious main expanding o'er the brow" (II. 17: 150), the rousing camaraderie of "hark to the Boatswain's call, the cheering cry!" (II. 18: 158) and the bright uncluttered simplicity of "white is the glassy deck, without a stain" (II. 19: 163) all ride the breakers of their own lines for two breezy assonantal stanzas (II. 17-19: 145-163) before the whisper of the potential to be otherwise captured in "without a

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Wootton, *Byronic Heroes in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing and Screen Adaptation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69.



stain” gives way to the image of the “staid Lieutenant” (II. 19: 164). In his ostensible praise of the Lieutenant’s “majestic” (II. 19: 166) imperiousness Byron appears to stumble, the lines becoming bogged down in the doldrums of stultifying caesurae and the becalming of a tangential tack beset with chewy pre-vocalic, post-vocalic and blended ‘r’ sounds:

... the lone chieftain, who majestic stalks,  
 Silent and fear’d by all—not oft he talks  
 With aught beneath him, if he would preserve  
 The strict restraint, which broken, ever balks  
 Conquest and Fame: but Britons rarely swerve  
 From Law, however stern, which tends their strength to nerve.  
 (II. 19: 166-171)

The poet’s own extended paean is grounded before it is begun as the lines’ content – the nautical frustration of becalmed waves – is mirrored in its phonology, liquid laterals joining liquid rhotic consonants to express dug-in, static enervation:

Blow! swiftly blow, thou keel-compelling gale!  
 Till the broad sun withdraws his lessening ray;  
 Then must the pennant-bearer slacken sail,  
 That lagging barks may make their lazy way.  
 Ah! grievance sore, and listless dull delay,  
 To waste on sluggish hulks the sweetest breeze!  
 What leagues are lost before the dawn of day,  
 Thus loitering pensive on the willing seas,  
 The flapping sail haul’d down to halt for logs like these!  
 (II. 20: 172-180)

Attempting to make the most of the situation with “The moon is up; by Heaven a lovely eve!” and replacing the aforementioned “glorious main expanding o’er the

brow” with “Long streams of light o’er dancing waves expand” (II. 21: 181), the poet lasts just one stanza before the liquid consonants and depressively-personified topography prefigure a shift into melancholic reflection:

Through Calpe’s straits survey the steepy shore;  
Europe and Afric on each other gaze!  
Lands of the dark-ey’d Maid and dusky Moor  
Alike beheld beneath pale Hecate’s blaze:  
How softly on the Spanish shore she plays,  
Disclosing rock, and slope, and forest brown,  
Distinct, though darkening with her waning phase;  
But Mauritania’s giant-shadows frown,  
From mountain-cliff to coast descending sombre down.

‘Tis night, when Meditation bids us feel  
We once have lov’d, though love is at an end:  
The heart, lone mourner of its baffled zeal,  
Though friendless now, will dream it had a friend.  
(II. 22-23: 190-202)

This equivocal attitude to water and its promised consolations even in the poet’s digressions into ostensible idealisation is not surprising, “the demon, Thought” ever “pursu[ing]” him such that his “zeal” is ever “baffled,” any physical journey destined to fail in his attempt to “from himself ... flee” (I. “To Inez” 6: 857-60). The Childe asks of water more than it has the power to give, the joys of seafaring as “antidote to an otherwise stagnant existence” destined to be only a temporary palliative,<sup>5</sup> and Harold’s melancholy derives in part from his fundamental understanding of this amidst his intermittent self-denial.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 69.

It is, paradoxically, often in moments of apparently unequivocal advocacy of the consolations of sea-travel that equivocation may be felt. When, early in canto I, our hero “from his native land resolv’d to go, / And visit scorching climes beyond the sea” (I. 6: 51-52), “resolv’d” draws attention to resistance’s potential even in its vanquishing; later, in Byron’s curious construction “without a sigh he left, to cross the brine” (I. 11: 98), the need to emphasise the sigh’s absence suggests he doth protest too much, just as the “without a stain” mentioned above operates much as Shelley’s negative prefixes and suffixes sometimes do,<sup>6</sup> to evoke lack even in its ostensible denial. Similarly, when the Childe is said to have “left without a sigh the land of war and crimes” (II. 16: 144), the phrase appears as the concluding alexandrine to a stanza in which the “cold stranger” is said to “little reck” the fact that “No lov’d one now in feign’d lament could rave; / No friend the parting hand extended gave” (II. 16: 138-41), with the repeated “no” and the shift from the cynical “feign’d” to a more straightforward valediction adding to the sense that “without a sigh” is a less-than-successful attempt to deny his own indifference. Between these two instances of the “without a sigh” construction, we see the poet-narrator’s self-knowledge present itself more to the fore, with the wry acknowledgement of his own digression in “hail[ing]” Parnassus “not perchance without a tear” (II. 63: 643).

When Byron “quite deliberately echoes”<sup>7</sup> Coleridge, as noted in Chapter One, with Harold’s “And now I’m in the world alone, / Upon the wide, wide sea [etc.]” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 9: 182-83), the lines resonate ominously just enough to undermine the

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy Webb offers an insight into this aspect of Shelley’s poetics in “The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*,” *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1983), 37-62.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

ostensible pugnacity of his apparent unconcern. Arguably, the same is true of the swiftness with which Byron presents the Childe as presumptively and erroneously interpreting the “weep[ing]” and “wail[ing]” of his “little page” as “tremb[ling] at the gale” and “dread” of “the billows’ rage” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 3: 134-37), when in fact the page is thinking about being absent from his “spouse and boys” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 7: 166). When the Childe proclaims “‘With thee, my bark, I’ll swiftly go / Athwart the foaming brine’” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 10: 190-91), the multivalent preposition speaks of a disjunctive rather than a fluent relationship with the sea, undermining the self-assurance of the adverb and adding to the ironic, combative tone of “welcome, welcome, ye dark-blue waves!” three lines later (I. “last ‘Good night’” 10: 193).<sup>8</sup> We see here, too, an example of Byron’s Homeric epithet of choice with regard to the sea, and the decision to apply a regular epithet in this way, along with intermittent apostrophes to the main, the brine, the waves, underscores its position in the poem as more than mere topographical detail: in Byron’s poem, the sea lives, has character, almost *is* a character, whose interaction with both the Childe and the poet-narrator forms a relationship as complex as any in the poem.

### III

Water’s representations and its functions are multiple and varying because throughout the cantos the mood, perspective and preoccupation of that interweaving triumvirate of Childe, poet-narrator and poet are multiple and varying. Writing on those whose “hearts ... throb with secret pain, / Even through the closest searment half-betray’d,”

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<sup>8</sup> “athwart, *prep.*” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>. 13 June 2015. The disjunctive sense of the word, as “across or transversely to the course or direction of,” is particularly pre-eminent when the word is used as a nautical term.

the poet-narrator suggests that “to such the gentle murmurs of the main / Seem to re-echo all they mourn in vain” (II. 82: 775-78): he is aware that water operates as an interpretative canvas on which an individual’s current state of mind might be projected, as it might be argued does the entire physical world of the poem, ever viewed through that prism of self and reflecting that self in turn. This sense is reinforced by the combination of these lines with those two stanzas earlier, in which, by the Bosphorus:

Loud was the lightsome tumult of the shore,  
Oft Music chang’d, but never ceas’d her tone,  
And timely echo’d back the measur’d oar,  
And rippling waters made a pleasant moan:

(II. 80: 756-59)

What is “echo’d” and “re-echo[ed]” in the physical description of the water in both instances is the perceiver’s state of mind. In *Childe Harold*, water is the clearest conductor of the self, and it also often functions as a way of reflecting other instances of what is essentially the same process, as it does here: when, in the transformative juncture between these two representations of water, the poet-narrator describes the “throng in merry masquerade” “bound in the rosy band” and – for all his proclaimed rejection of the negative “prattl[ing]” of “stage or cynic” – asks “lurk there no hearts that throb with secret pain?” (II. 81-82: 771-75), his state of mind is not simply projected onto a nominated representative of his psyche, but rather his psyche is conjured into existence and, like Narcissus, proceeds to see in the water its own image. The poetical and psychological workings – the conjuring, and its representation as

such – form part of our affective response: a self-reflexive half-mindfulness, a nod to the poem as poem, which is part of our experience as a reader.

Such impositions of the psyche have been seen pejoratively. The centrality of Byron's ego to his poetic making sparked contemporary critical opprobrium, Hazlitt writing that "in works of genius we prefer him who bows to the authority of nature, who appeals to actual objects, to mouldering superstitions, to history, observation, and tradition, before him who only, consults the pragmatic and restless workings of his own breast, and gives them out as oracles to the world."<sup>9</sup> Hazlitt was addressing a wider corpus than these cantos, but nevertheless the comment does Byron a disservice: the relationship between the "restless workings of his own breast," the "authority of nature" and "actual objects" is less simple than Hazlitt suggests. When, in comparing Byron unfavourably with Sir Walter Scott, Hazlitt states that "he [Scott] casts his descriptions in the mould of nature ... instead of casting them constantly in the mind of his own individual impressions,"<sup>10</sup> he rightly points towards an aspect of Byron's work but wrongly assumes a simplicity in its manifestation. The same is true of Mazzini in suggesting that "the world around him neither rules nor tempers him. The Byronian Ego aspires to rule *it*,"<sup>11</sup> and it is also true of Macaulay when he writes that Byron was "the chief object in every landscape" and that "the wonders of the outer world ... all were mere accessories—the background to one dark and melancholy

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<sup>9</sup> William Hazlitt, "Lord Byron," *The Spirit of the Age*, 1825, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 69-78, 71. Hazlitt's essay spans the revelation of Byron's death, and includes a coda somewhat ameliorative of the essay's earlier censure, written once the news had broken.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Giuseppe Mazzini, "Byron and Goethe," *The Morning Chronicle*, September 1839, *BCH*, 330-341, 331.

figure.”<sup>12</sup> Morley’s suggestion that, for Byron, “nature ... is but the background and theatre of the tragedy of man”<sup>13</sup> similarly falls short of the mark even if we agree with its general drift that, as Paul Elmer More says, “at bottom Byron’s sympathy is not with nature, but with man,”<sup>14</sup> unless we perceive “theatre” in the way I have elucidated the word in relation to the title of this thesis: at once a physical space in which the performance of Byron’s poetic making takes place, and an imaginative space performatively informed by and created by that poetic making.

The poet’s decision-making is ill-served by such characterisations. Byron could have created a fully formed figure observing the scene through the prism of their melancholia, but chooses to allow the projection to stand, the symbiosis of the relationship between poet-narrator’s state of mind and the created world of the poem meaningfully “half betray’d,” as the empirically absent but assumed “hearts that throb with secret pain” function as a point of narrative departure allowing the expression of the poet-narrator’s state of mind. There is some truth in Gleckner’s assertion that “the focus of *Childe Harold* is upon the narrator’s reaction to the scenes and events of a poem which is happening to him, and upon the poet’s organization of and attitudes towards that reaction,”<sup>15</sup> yet the multidirectionality of Byron’s poetic making is such that we should acknowledge that part of “the poet’s organization of an attitudes towards that reaction” involves the reactive construction of “the scenes and events” themselves.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Macaulay, review in the *Edinburgh Review*, June 1831, of Thomas Moore’s *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron: with Notices of His Life*, *BCH*, 295-316, 313.

<sup>13</sup> John Morley, *Critical Miscellanies*, 1871, *BCH*, 393.

<sup>14</sup> “The Wholesome Revival of Byron,” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1898, 801-809, 807. *BCH*, 480-83, 483.

<sup>15</sup> Gleckner, 48.

In Chapter One I examined the dexterous audacity of mobility's reach in Byron: the capacity to make malleable fixity in all its forms, placing pressure in unexpected directions with unexpected results, finding the seemingly impervious friable. The "dialectical suspension of ... certainties" noted by Terence Hoagwood extends beyond just the "doctrinal"<sup>16</sup> – or, to put it another way, the force of this iconoclastic touch renders everything as doctrinal, literary convention and seemingly inviolable physical law alike. In relation to fluidity – to the contrast between solid and liquid – we see again the audaciousness of the directions in which Byron's destabilising attention turns, the corollary here being not simply the periodical attributing of stasis to representations of water – perhaps most clearly seen in the closing stanzas of canto II in the notably terrestrial descriptive term "Ocean's plain" (II. 90: 848) – but the repeated destabilisation of the fixity of the material object.

Peter Graham observes of *Don Juan* that "though grounded," the poem "hovers,"<sup>17</sup> and whilst his focus is the poem's "literary and social milieux,"<sup>18</sup> it seems to be true in lots of other ways besides. It might be said that *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is both grounded and floating, again in lots of ways, and whilst I am not unsympathetic to Swinburne's feeling that "between *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan* the same difference exists which a swimmer feels between lake-water and sea-water: the one is fluent, yielding, invariable; the other has in it a life and pulse, a sting and a swell,"<sup>19</sup> I feel he underestimates the variability of *Childe Harold*, a variability which involves the

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<sup>16</sup> Hoagwood, *Byron's Dialectic*, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Graham, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Preface to Swinburne's *Selection from the Works of Lord Byron* (1866), *BCH*, 373-83, 375.



One manifestation of this is the particularly Shelleyan device in which topographical and architectural features are afforded vitality through reflection in water. “What beauties doth Lisboa first unfold! / Her image floating on that noble tide” (I. 16: 216-17), asks the poet-narrator, followed by a description not of the city but the water (“Which poets vainly pave with sands of gold, / But now whereon a thousand keeps did ride / Of mighty strength ...” (I. 16: 218-10)); late in canto II “Tritonia’s airy shrine ... gleams along the wave” (II. 86: 812-13). We are invited to imagine “bending o’er the vessel’s laving side, / To gaze on Dian’s wave-reflected sphere” (II. 24: 218-19); later, the “woods along the banks” of “some bold river” which “breaks the long expanse” are “waving high,” and their “shadows in the glassy waters dance” (II. 54: 483-85)). Returning to the “merry masquerade” by the Bosphorus strait, it is said that:

Woods or moon, the solid object is rendered mobile through reflection. Upon “gaz[ing]” on the reflected moon, “The soul forgets her schemes of Hope and Pride, / And flies unconscious o’er each backward year” (II. 24: 209-11); similarly, the “smooth ... vale” in which the “bold river” rests offers a place for the “wearied eye” to “repose gladly,” “tir’d of up-gazing” (II. 54: 479-83); and in the final example, after

the “gentle murmurs of the main / Seem to re-echo all they mourn in vain,” the poet going on to write that “To such the gladness of the gamesome crowd / Is source of wayward thought” (II. 82: 777-80).

The poet-narrator’s response to the solid object made mobile through reflection in water is to undergo a shift from sensory focus to unbidden memory. The destabilisation of the external world’s physicality either occasions a retreat into the self, operates as a narrative presaging of such a retreat, or forms part of a process of retreat which feeds one into the other. In the last of these, the dissolution of the material world both occasions and is occasioned by a lapse into memory rather in the manner of a cinematographic soft-focus shimmer signalling a movement from the present to the past, from external reality to internal memory. Taking to the seas to escape “the demon, Thought,” Byron finds water in all its forms to be, for him, no Lethe granting him the unmindfulness he seeks: rather, its effect is often the opposite, a catalyst to “Consciousness awaking to her woes” (I. 92: 941) – a transportation of precisely the wrong kind. The poet-narrator’s rueful comment towards the end of canto I that “not yet had [Harold] drunk of Lethe’s stream” (I. 82: 814) appears to be just as true at the close of canto II, and as true for poet-narrator and poet as it is for the Childe.

Often the attribution of motion is more straightforward: where “Chimaera’s alps extend from left to right,” we are invited to look “beneath,” where “a living valley seems to stir; / Flocks play, trees wave, streams flow, the mountain-fir / Nodding above: behold black Acheron!” (II. 51: 453-56). The land is made mobile and shifting, hardly any less static than the reflection of land or moon in water noted above. In part

this is surely related to the exigencies of narrative and description, the active more engaging than the passive, the mobile more engaging than the still. Elsewhere, though, the effect is more subtle, and what is striking is its ubiquity.

When Byron describes “Cadiz, rising on the distant coast” (I. 65: 659) and “rising o’er the dark blue sea” (I. 71: 712), its mobility strikes us, if it strikes us at all, as simply a conventional descriptive trope, suggestive of the observer’s perspective as the object comes into view; when we read in the description of Tepalen the “busy hum of warrior-men / Swelling the breeze that sigh’d along the lengthening glen” (II. 55: 494-45), that final adjective might strike us as idiosyncratic in its ascribing of motion to topography, but nothing more, even when we encounter the use of the similar “deepening glen and wold” (II. 88: 834) later in the canto. When Byron writes that “the Muezzin’s call doth shake the minaret” (II. 59: 530) we might see the employment of simple hyperbole, not worthy of comment; and when a description of Illyria ends its alexandrine with “lowering coast” (II. 46: 414) we might, as Francis Jeffrey does, dismiss it as concluding “mean and flat” lines which exemplify “considerable marks of haste and carelessness” to be found in the cantos.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, when, early in canto I, it is said that “fast the white rocks faded from his view, / And soon were lost in circumambient foam” (I. 12: 103), or a few lines later that “my native shore / Fades o’er the waters blue” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 1: 119-20), or “white flew the vessel on her snowy wing, / And fleeting shores receded from his sight” (I. 13: 115), the sense of reversal, in which the water seems more substantial, more fixed, than the shifting, “fast ... fading,”

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<sup>20</sup> Unsigned review in the *Edinburgh Review*, May 1812, *BCH*, 41.

“fad[ing] o’er,” “fleeting,” “receding” land, might strike us as no more than poetic licence, and hardly unconventional.

However, as we look throughout the work to find unambiguously static descriptions of the static, we find them strangely elusive. I noted above the reflected image of Tritonia’s shrine which “gleams along the wave” and the waves of the Ambracian Gulf “gleam[ing] at rest”; similarly, at “monastic Zitza” (II. 48: 424), the “convent’s white walls glisten far on high” (II. 49: 437); the “minarets of Tepalen” are “glittering” (their walls also “o’erlook the stream”) (II. 55: 492-93); the “Babylonian whore” “flaunts” the dome of the Catholic Church at Mafra in “glorious sheen” (I. 29: 338-39); Lisboa is a “town / That, sheening far, celestial seems to be” (I. 17: 225-26). In each case, the focus is not on the thing itself but its gleam, its glisten, its glitter, its sheen – or, more specifically and significantly, its gleaming, its glistening, its glittering, its sheening, the fixed object in its activity, its mobility. There is a removal from its static nature, an in-the-moment presentness attributed to architecture, the solid and unmoving described with a focus on the ephemeral, as if affording them an ephemeral mobility is Byron’s method of choice for imbuing them with substance. From the dedicatory verses onwards, in which Ianthe’s eye “wild as the Gazelle’s, ... Wins as it wanders, dazzles where it dwells” (“To Ianthe” 4: 28-30), dazzling, glittering, sheening and gleaming is to be found everywhere in these two cantos: “flames along ... faces gleam’d” (II. 72: 645); the matador is dressed “in costly sheen” (I. 74: 738); the “various arms” of rival armies “glitter in the air” (I. 40: 435).

On the rare occasions that we do find static objects, as in an inventory in canto I – “the mountain howitzer,” “the station’d bands, the never-vacant watch, / The magazine in rocky durance stow’d, / The holster’d steed beneath the shed of thatch” – the items are intermingled with the conventionally static imbued with a breaking out of form: “the broken road, / The bristling palisade, the fosse o’er-flow’d,” “the ever-blazing match” (I. 51: 534-9), all of which, it is said, “portend the deeds to come” (I. 52: 540). Formally speaking, these mingled images of formal integrity and formal disintegration do precisely that, portending both the stanza breaking its bounds as it runs on to the next, and a mid-stanza hiatus in which the poet, like Napoleon within the verse, “pauseth” and “a little moment deigneth to delay” (I. 52: 542-43). Similarly, in canto II, armed nations which “mingled in their many-hued array” (II. 57: 512) presage the soft cross-stanza punctuation which leaves the stanzas, as the armies, “mix’d conspicuous” (II.58-59: 522-23).

Things are everywhere imbued with ephemeral movement which might more ordinarily be associated with the operations of thought, or memory, or imagination, such as the way “busy Memory” regarding John Edleston “flashes on [the poet’s] brain” (II. 9: 76).<sup>21</sup> The point, of course, is that such memory does have a significance, a substance to it, and in the description of material objects the possession of a quality of momentary, blink-and-you-miss-it action allows the substantial greater substance, greater presence, greater existence. Just as we see across both poets the operations of a mobile poetic making which seeks to stave off the nihilistic threat of “the figurality

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<sup>21</sup> The fruits of this “busy memory” are themselves possessed of an ephemeral, interstitial quality: Gavin Hopps cites Byron’s lines on John Edleston as an example of “figures of ‘half-aliveness’; that is, apostrophic presences that appear to belong neither to the realm of the living nor the dead.” “Shades of Being: Byron and the Trespassing of Ontology,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 52.

of all signification,”<sup>22</sup> we see the staving off of a similar threat in relation to the material universe. I have mentioned before the importance Byron attaches to actually being there, to witnessing places first-hand; there is a sense that the poet feels a responsibility to demonstrate the benefit of such bearing witness, and the imbuing of motion in this way, the mobile and active operations of nature upon the fixed object which attests to your physical presence at the place, is a way of doing this.

#### IV

Gavin Hopps begins his Introduction to *Byron's Ghosts* with Byron's punning “immaterialism's a serious matter” (*DJ* XVI. 114: 958) as precursor to a discussion which notes, and questions, the dominant perception of Byron as a materialist, in so doing opening up a consideration of “the spectral, the spiritual and the supernatural” in the poet's work.<sup>23</sup> It seems to me that the poet's repeated imbuing of the material object with forms of fluidity and motion, allied with the poet's particular attitude to ruination discussed below, are manifestations of the same general engagement with insubstantiality pointed towards in Hopps' collection of essays.<sup>24</sup>

Byron at his best is a fine constructor of the “stationing” which Keats so admired in Milton,<sup>25</sup> but the power in the evocation of the statuesque derives, paradoxically, from the movement imbued in the stasis:

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<sup>22</sup> de Man, “Shelley Disfigured,” 116.

<sup>23</sup> *Byron's Ghosts*, 1-29.

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter Seven for my own discussion of the significance of the Black Friar and Fitz-Fulke in relation to Byronic instability.

<sup>25</sup> Keats writes in his marginalia to *Paradise Lost* that “Milton in every instance pursues his imagination to the utmost” and that “in no instance is this sort of perseverance more exemplified than in what may be called his *Stationing or statuary*: He is not content with simple description, he must station,—thus

Lo! Where the Giant on the mountain stands,  
 His blood-red tresses deep'ning in the sun,  
 With death-shot glowing in his fiery hands,  
 And eye that scorcheth all it glares upon;  
 Restless it rolls, now fix'd, and now anon  
 Flashing afar...

(I. 39: 423-28)

Tresses “deep’ning,” death-shot “glowing,” eye “scorch[ing]” and “glar[ing],” “restless[ly] roll[ing]” and “flashing afar”: the truly static, devoid of motion, is ever hard to come by. Similarly, the stanza describing Tepalen is worth considering as a whole:

The Sun had sunk behind vast Tomerit,  
 And Laos wide and fierce came roaring by;  
 The shades of wonted night were gathering yet,  
 When, down the steep banks winding warily,  
 Childe Harold saw, like meteors in the sky,  
 The glittering minarets of Tepalen,  
 Whose walls o'erlook the stream; and drawing nigh,  
 He heard the busy hum of warrior-men  
 Swelling the breeze that sigh'd along the lengthening glen.

(II. 55: 487-95)

We see mobility take multiple forms in this stanza, a sense of motion surrounding the fixed object which is not only “glittering” but described using a simile which speaks,

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here [Book vii, 417-23], we not only see how the Birds ‘*with clang despised the ground,*’ but we see them ‘*under a cloud in prospect*’ So we see Adam *Fair indeed and tall—under a plantane*—and so we see Satan ‘*disfigured—on the Assyrian Mount*’ This last ... has a dramatic vastness and solemnity fit and worthy to hold one amazed in the midst of this Paradise Lost,” *KMW*, 344.

above all else, of movement. In the description of Cintra, “variegated” (I. 18: 237) and “sheening far” (I. 17: 226), the artist’s inability to convey it is used as a description of its vitality (I. 18: 238-42), the views too “dazzling unto mortal ken” (I. 18. 240), the “dazzling” used, as in the description of Ianthe’s eyes, to suggest vibrancy, vitality and mobility.

Byron uses motion to describe objects that are clearly static and unmoving, and he even does so when the emphasis he is seeking is on an object’s very stasis, its lack of activity. In the description of the Childe’s “deserted ... hall” with its “desolate” “hearth,” the emptiness and desolation is described through the “wild weeds ... gathering on the wall” (I. “last ‘Good night’” 2: 130-32), with the present continuous verb form, seemingly so at odds with a description of static place, recruited to evoke a lack of movement – something we see elsewhere with the “mouldering tower” (II. 2: 17) and “mouldering shrines” (II. 15: 130) of Greece. The image of the “wild weeds ... gathering” is recalled at Cintra, where “giant weeds a passage scarce allow / To halls deserted” (I. 23: 283-84), as if his apprehension of new places is modulated through the prism of the place he has left – or, to put it another way, he finds that, for all his journeying, he has not left it at all.<sup>26</sup> Only in the most extreme description of lifelessness – his evocative contemplation of the skull at the start of canto II – does Byron convey true stasis, with the adjective “lack-lustre” used to describe the “eyeless hole[s]” of the skull (II. 6: 50), which we might contrast with the “dazzling” used to describe Ianthe’s eyes, as mentioned above: in the context of our discussion of “sheening,” “gleaming” etc. above, “lack-lustre” has the whisper about it of the dead

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<sup>26</sup> See Chapter Seven for a further exploration of this aspect of Byron’s attitude to place.



metaphor resurrected, and connects with both the body-as-architecture conceit Byron explicitly employs in this stanza and the use of ruins and ruination as a complex metaphor.

The poem's opening details of "Delphi's long deserted shrine" describe the motion of water even as it ostensibly seeks to describe the stasis of abandonment, the poet-narrator "wander[ing] by" the Muse's "vaunted rill," where "save for that feeble fountain, all is still" (I. 1: 5-7). Water is used a number of times in these cantos to suggest motion at the centre of the fixed. Byron employs this for figurative effect in his translation of the Souliotes' war song, the Souliote described as "descend[ing] to the plain like the stream from the rock" (II. Souliote's Song 2: 656), but it is more often used in physical description: at "monastic Zitza," "beneath, the distant torrent's rushing sound / Tells where the volum'd cataract doth roll / Between those hanging rocks" (II. 48: 430-32), and at Tepalen, "in marble-pav'd pavilion" the poet describes a "spring / Of living water" which "from the centre rose, / Whose bubbling did a genial freshness fling, / And soft voluptuous couches breathed repose" (II. 62: 550-53), as if the water's softness and "bubbling" mobility "fling[s]" itself on to the "marble-paved" solidity, affording a "genial freshness" to the starkly concrete. Here, water both brings flux to fixed delineation and as an imagistic device of motion and transmutation bleeds over into the subject which follows, as it does when Byron describes "the Paynim turban and the Christian crest / Mix'd on the bleeding stream" (I. 34: 385-6), and four lines later the "mountain streams" of Spain are wistfully recollected as having been "dy'd ... with Gothic gore" (I. 35: 390).

On the one hand, water's repeated positioning at the heart of the ostensibly fixed may be seen to offer itself in support of those critics, such as Robert Gleckner in *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise*,<sup>27</sup> and George Ridenour in *The Style of "Don Juan,"*<sup>28</sup> who see Byron's poetics as essentially entropic in nature, depicting a world tending towards dissolution and decline; alternatively, such imagery may be seen as offering an imagistic corollary to the condition of vitalising disruption which may be found in both *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*. Like the "silver streamlet" dividing the "rival kingdoms" which "press on its verdant sides," "flow[ing]" "peaceful still twist bitterest foemen" (I. 33: 369-74), the mobility of water stands between fixed objects as it stands between fixed boundaries, fixed loyalties, fixed opinions, operating symbiotically as at once generative of, product of and representative of liminal space and, by extension, the flux of mobility and change.

It is perhaps ironic that for a poet so seemingly wedded to the running from change to change that a key focus of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* is a prolonged lamentation for the changed nature of Greece and Italy. Often elegiac in tone, what is this a pilgrimage to if not those fallen places, their halcyon days lost with the passing of time? We see this early in canto II:

Ancient of days! august Athena! where,  
Where are thy men of might? thy grand in soul?

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<sup>27</sup> Gleckner writes of the "melancholy, deepening slowly into despair" within Byron's work, "made up of man's utter puzzlement at the mixture of good and evil and the unwilling but apparently inevitable perversion of that good in himself and the world around him," Gleckner, xxiv.

<sup>28</sup> Ridenour's lapsarian reading of *Don Juan* offers a description of "an apparently immutable law of Byron's world" which would lend itself well as one possible interpretation of the images of water within, amidst and springing from solid rock: "as violence and disorder lurk behind the most winning manifestations of tranquillity and harmony, the tranquil and harmonious are fated inevitably to dissolve again in the violent and chaotic," *The Style of "Don Juan"* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1960), 45.

Gone—glimmering through the dream of things that were:  
First in the race that led to Glory's goal,  
They won, and pass'd away—is this the whole?  
A school-boy's tale, the wonder of an hour!  
The warrior's weapon and the sophist's stole  
Are sought in vain, and o'er each mouldering tower,  
Dim with the mist of years, grey flits the shade of power.  
(II. 2: 10-18)

We might note, however, that there is action, motion, vitality associated with the imperfect recollection, which is “glimmering through the dream of things that were.” Intuitively, it may seem that Byron is presenting to us what is lost, the imperfect remnants of something formerly great, and yet it is their very nature as something lost or half-lost, recalled or half-recalled, that creates their activity, their vibrancy, their “glimmering”: is the glimmering occurring *in spite* of their deterioration or loss, or, in whole or in part, due to their very nature as deteriorated and lost? It is the mind’s activity working upon that which is lost which gives life to the lost, affording it a mobile and living presence: these “gleams / Of past existence” (149-50),<sup>29</sup> as Wordsworth puts it in “Tintern Abbey,” are more vital because they are the product of a mobile process of interaction between external reality and the mind acting upon that external reality, a process which is more mobile, more involved, when that external object is in a state of decay and therefore in its imperfection more evocative, more in need of the mind acting upon it to supply that which it was but is not, precisely *because* it is not any more.

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<sup>29</sup> “Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” *WMW*, 131-35.

If, as Wordsworth would have it in his contemplation of his ruined abbey, the “mighty world / Of eye and ear” acts to both “perceive” and “half-create” (106-8), it is in ruins, in the space of these living gaps, in objects whose ontologies are bound up with absence as much as presence, that activity and vitality occurs. Like the “wild weeds” “gathering on the wall” in the Childe’s “father’s hall,” the tower is “mouldering,” paradoxically active in its ruination, and it is over these towers that “dim with the mist of years, grey flits the shade of power.” “Flits” suggests both fleetingness and speed, and this connection between ephemerality and activity is a key one, for Byron as it is for Shelley. The ephemeral is both less and more there, both less and more real and substantial, and this is key to our understanding of Byron’s poem, and, within this, our particular understanding of how ruins and ruination is presented. In turn, the significance of ruin and their mode of representation in these cantos is connected to a wider interest in absence as much as presence, in the *un-* as *ur-*, which runs through Byron’s work and finds its complex fruition in the English cantos of *Don Juan*, as I shall explore in Chapter Seven.

## V

Just as “glimmering through the dreams of things that were” would sit quite comfortably amongst Wordsworth’s ruminations in the Wye valley, “dim with the mist of years, grey flits the shade of power” would not feel out of place if transplanted into “Mont Blanc” or “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (compare, for example, the latter’s “the awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen amongst us” (1-2)), yet the fact that in the ebb and flow of his text Byron often flits towards and away from such lines of Shelleyan hypermobility has not been subject to serious critical

attention. As mentioned in the Introduction, readings of formal operations with a closeness and sensitivity comparable to the work undertaken by Jerrold Hogle, Earl Wasserman, William Keach and Michael O'Neill on Shelley are rare in relation to Byron. Yet if we turn our attention to "the texture of Byron's poetry at the level of the reading experience," as Jane Stabler puts it in her own call for greater critical engagement with this area,<sup>30</sup> we find a telling complexity.

As I argued in the previous chapter, in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" the "Power" is apprehended imperfectly ("though unseen") and at one remove: it is the "shadow," not the thing itself, which is "float[ing] ... among us," that is to say, if our apprehension were perfect and full, the thing which would be apprehended is itself nevertheless a "shadow" of something else. In Byron, this is also the case: the mobile and vital thing is the "shade of power," i.e. the thing to be apprehended is the "shade," not the power itself; its apprehension is imperfect – "grey" and "dim with the mist of years"; and in addition to both of these removals from the perfect apprehension of the thing itself, that imperfect apprehension of the thing-at-one-remove is itself something which "flits," i.e. is intermittent. The "tower" is not a source of visual power and mobile vitality lessened by its ruined state; rather, its ruined state occasions its visual power and mobile vitality. The image as the reader receives it is powerful as a consequence of a triumvirate of qualities, none of which is the perfected tower of the past: the life of the lines lie in the tower as ruin, the imperfect apprehension it occasions, and the intermittent nature of that imperfect apprehension. Its greatness is not merely residual; rather, its residuality, its nature as a ruin, is a source of greatness.

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<sup>30</sup> Stabler, 10.

Towards the end of canto II Byron, speaking to the ruins of Greece, says that when the country itself is risen to its former glory “Then may’st thou be restored; but not till then,” and asks: “when / Can man its shatter’d splendour renovate, / Recall its virtues back, and vanquish Time and Fate?” (II. 84: 796-800). The physical and architectural “renovate” gives way to the multivalent “recall,” which speaks in part of apprehension and memory as a creative force: it is in the “recall[ing] [of] virtues back” that those virtues gain their power and value, rather than possessing innate power and value in and of themselves.<sup>31</sup> This gives way to a depiction in which the valorisation is focused on the ruins as ruins more than on their previous glories:

And yet how lovely in thine age of woe,  
Land of lost gods and godlike men! art thou!  
The vales of ever-green, thy hills of snow,  
Proclaim thee Nature's varied favourite now;  
Thy fanes, thy temples to thy surface bow,  
Commingling slowly with heroic earth,  
Broke by the share of every rustic plough:  
So perish monuments of mortal birth,  
So perish all in turn, save well-recorded Worth;

Save where some solitary column mourns  
Above its prostrate brethren of the cave;  
Save where Tritonia's airy shrine adorns  
Colonna's cliff, and gleams along the wave;  
Save o'er some warrior's half-forgotten grave,  
Where the gray stones and unmolested grass  
Ages, but not oblivion, feebly brave,  
While strangers only not regardless pass,  
Lingering like me, perchance, to gaze, and sigh 'Alas!'  
(II: 85-86: 801-18)

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<sup>31</sup> See Chapter Six for a consideration of Shelley’s use of the word “recall” in Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*.

Does the “and yet” suggest simply that Greece is *still* lovely, *despite* its fall, or does it operate as a rhetorical discourse marker – the poet, at first moved by the sight into imagining Greece returning to its former glory, countering his own desire upon finding himself moved to appreciate the loveliness of Greece in its present state in and of itself rather than as a less lovely version of something which has gone before? Taken as a whole, the first two lines appear to suggest the latter at least as much as the former: the land is “lovely in [its] age of woe,” i.e. it is its state of being in an age of woe which is the source of this particular loveliness. Robert Gleckner is right to describe “Athenian Greece” as, for Byron, “that fabled land that was to be for him throughout his life the closest man has come to recovering Eden,”<sup>32</sup> yet it is clear in Byron’s contemplations in this canto that he finds value – contemplative, poetic, creative – in its position specifically as a fallen place. In its ruin, in its entropic movement, lies a harmonising beauty, “Nature’s varied favourite,” the “fanes” and “temples” “bow[ing]” to the surface of the land, “commingling slowly with heroic earth,” a commingling formally reflected in the punctuation which leaves the stanza commingling with the next.

The harmony and unity presented here serves to destabilise the emphasis in the repetition of both “so perish ...” and “save ...” which follows. “So perish,” ostensibly functioning as an acknowledgement of, and lamentation for, the inevitability of decay and the consuming rigours of time, becomes, rather, imperative in mood: in both interpretations there is acceptance, but the shift is from tragic inevitability to a sense of a consummation devoutly – or agnostically – to be wished or half-wished. However,

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<sup>32</sup> Gleckner, xx.

what is wished for is not the “perish[ing]” only – or rather, not the perishing utterly – but a “perish[ing] ... save where some solitary column mourns.” It is in the “mouldering” towers, the “mourn[ing]” columns, the “commingling” fanes and temples, the “gleam[ing]” shrines where power lies. Though, as Chapter Seven will explore, the pressure of squaring this troublesome circle will lead him in a different direction by the time of the English cantos of *Don Juan*, here at this stage in his poetic career Byron finds the appropriate imagistic device to bridge the twin meaninglessnesses of artefactual fixity and the unarticulated thought, and the device is not the object which is now found only in ruin but the object of the ruin itself. Ruin inhabits a middle ground between formed and unformed which holds the significance and functionality of each whilst being ameliorative of their constraints and shortcomings: Byron’s expression of this delicate position finds its representation neither in the perfected fixity of art nor the mobility of water but in the decaying artefact: in the form of the formerly formed.

When Byron writes of “some warrior’s half-forgotten grave,” it is as important that it is not universally or completely remembered as it is that it is not universally or completely forgotten; similarly, when Byron writes “strangers only not regardless pass,” in the imbuing of the grave with significance the attentiveness of strangers is no more important than the fact that, for some, familiarity has bred disregard. When Byron writes “feebly brave,” his sentence construction allows for the term to adhere to both the ruined artefact and oblivion itself, and emotive power lies in both the feebleness and the bravery of both.



In the stanzas that follow Byron expresses a beauty in the present which is not an inferior shadow of a former beauty but one predicated upon the harmony of ruins as “commingl[ing]” with nature:

Yet are thy skies as blue, thy crags as wild;  
Sweet are thy groves, and verdant are thy fields,  
Thine olive ripe as when Minerva smil'd,  
And still his honied wealth Hymettus yields;  
There the blithe bee his fragrant fortress builds,  
The freeborn wanderer of thy mountain-air;  
Apollo still thy long, long summer gilds,  
Still in his beam Mendeli's marbles glare;  
Art, Glory, Freedom fail, but Nature still is fair.

Where'er we tread 'tis haunted, holy ground,  
No earth of thine is lost in vulgar mould,  
But one vast realm of wonder spreads around,  
And all the Muse's tales seem truly told,  
Till the sense aches with gazing to behold  
The scenes our earliest dreams have dwelt upon:  
Each hill and dale, each deepening glen and wold  
Defies the power which crush'd thy temples gone:  
Age shakes Athena's tower, but spares gray Marathon.

(II. 87-88: 819-36)

In light of my discussion above, it is difficult to see “shakes” as wholly pejorative in nature. What he is paying homage to is not so much their former glory but the power of their present fallen state.

Byron rejects the “renovat[ion]” of the “shatter'd splendour” unless through the vitalising “recall” of the imagination and memory operating upon it. He is spurred to contemplation and to imagining the place's former glory, before asking:

Such was the scene—what now remaineth here?  
What sacred trophy marks the hollow'd ground,  
Recording Freedom's smile and Asia's tear?  
The rifled urn, the violated mound,  
The dust thy courser's hoof, rude stranger! spurns around.

Yet to the remnants of thy splendour past  
Shall pilgrims, pensive, but unwearied, throng;  
(II. 90-91: 850-56)

It is these remnants, as remnants, which are significant: they are worthy of pilgrimage in a way that ancient Greece and Rome would not have been, their sacredness lying in their ruination. The tender sadness which comes with this fallen state makes it the perfect place for those with the Childe's melancholy cast:

The parted bosom clings to wonted home,  
If aught that's kindred cheer the welcome hearth;  
He that is lonely hither let him roam,  
And gaze complacent on congenial earth.  
Greece is no lightsome land of social mirth:  
But he whom Sadness sootheth may abide,  
And scarce regret the region of his birth,  
When wandering slow by Delphi's sacred side,  
Or gazing o'er the plains where Greek and Persian died.

Let such approach this consecrated land,  
And pass in peace along the magic waste.  
(II. 92-93: 864-872)

Those with something to go back for long to do so; anyone else should come here, the poet-narrator says. It is land consecrated by its fallen state, its magic lying in its nature as waste. In the description of Cintra early in canto I, the poet writes:

On sloping mounds, or in the vale beneath,  
Are domes where whilome kings did make repair;  
But now the wild flowers round them only breathe;  
Yet ruin'd splendour still is lingering there.

(I. 22: 270-74)

It is less clear than it might be what is “lingering there”: “splendour” lingering in spite of its ruination, or “ruin’d splendour” as an entity in itself, with both the “yet” and the “still” possessing sufficient ambiguity to allow both interpretations space to be held, just as in the “and yet how lovely in thine age of woe” discussed above. “Splendour,” it seems, is Byron’s term of choice for describing the magnificence of the classical world before its fall: splendour which is “past,” “shatter’d” or “ruin’d” becomes different in kind, more powerful and certainly more evocative than that which has been lost.

Late in canto II the poet writes “Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth! / Immortal, though no more; though fallen, great!” (II. 73: 693-94). Gleckner says of these lines that “Greece is ‘Fair,’ yet finally only a ‘relic’ of what was once fair; it is immortal, alive, yet dead; great, but no more. ... In his mind’s eye the poet sees the paradise as if it had never been lost; but the reality of the ruin pricks each dream’s bubble in the moment of formation.”<sup>33</sup> Yet the lines are, I think, more equivocal than Gleckner’s analysis suggests, his use of “only” more definitively pejorative than the lines sustain. The lines are poised such that they hold the possibility of expressing a worth departed

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 85.

but replaced by something both “immortal” and “great” in its “fallen” state as “sad relic,” each “though” hovering between regretful poignancy and bullish assertion.

It is ostensibly self-evident that plastic art is *de facto* diminished by ruination: that what is left is innately not just physically *less* but *lesser* than what was originally there.<sup>34</sup> Yet it is something which Byron’s work clearly contests.<sup>35</sup> Early in canto II, as if pausing for breath between his eulogising of John Edleston and his attack on Britain’s appropriation of the Elgin marbles, the poet-narrator writes:

Here let me sit upon this massy stone,  
The marble column's yet unshaken base;  
Here, son of Saturn! was thy fav'rite throne:  
Mightiest of any such! Hence let me trace  
The latent grandeur of thy dwelling place.  
It may not be: nor ev'n can Fancy's eye  
Restore what Time hath labour'd to deface.  
Yet these proud pillars claim no passing sigh,  
Unmov'd the Moslem sits, the light Greek carols by.  
(II. 10: 82-90)

Here, perhaps, we have a visual representation of how the power of ruins operates for Byron. Where Shelley’s “Ozymandias” allows those “vast and trunkless legs of stone” (2) to stand alone in their desolation, and allows its tale to be told at one remove by

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<sup>34</sup> Swinburne employs this very conceit in his contention that “no detached morsel of *Don Juan* ... will serve to show or suggest [its] excellence”: “as fragments they are exquisite and noble, like the broken hand or severed foot of a Greek statue; but here as much is lost as there. Taken with their context, they regain as much of beauty and of force as the sculptured foot or hand when, reunited to the perfect body, they resume their place and office among its vital and various limbs.” *Essays and Studies*, 1875, 238-58, *BCH*, 373-83, 380-81.

<sup>35</sup> As Chapter Seven’s consideration of Norman Abbey will show, this is as true of *Don Juan* as it is of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*.

the construct of the “traveller from an antique land” (1),<sup>36</sup> with Byron it is the poet-narrator who is the traveller, and it is the poet-narrator himself who is being stationed, is being made artefact: is being made an extension of the ruin.<sup>37</sup> The stone is “massy” (an adjective Byron also employs in his notes to this section),<sup>38</sup> and “yet unshaken,” the “yet” suggesting, perhaps, both the trials it has undergone and its temporal as well as spatial stationing, present at this point in time but not forever. Byron employs his deictic trope once again, the repeated “here” speaking of his role as pilgrim, as witness, and in the repeated “let me” there is the movement towards a kind of communion with the stone: as ruins are described as “commingling” with the earth, here we have the poet positioning himself as a part of, an extension of, the ruined object.<sup>39</sup> In this position the poet-narrator hopes to “trace / The latent grandeur of thy dwelling place”: the “shatter’d splendour” of ruin offers the poet a role as extension of that ruin, as a conduit of its recreation,<sup>40</sup> attempting to recreate the marble column, or to allow the marble column to be recreated through him.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *SMW*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Beatty writes that “the poet of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* ... sits by a ‘massy stone’” (my italics). But it seems to me that it is specifically the stationing “upon” the stone rather than “by” it which gives this scene its particular significance. Bernard Beatty, “Determining Unknown Modes of Being: A Map of Byron’s Ghosts and Spirits,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Byron describes the Elgin marbles as “valuable and massy relics,” *BMW*, 86.

<sup>39</sup> Gleckner describes Harold as “a pilgrim seeking no shrine but escape from a world in ruins, himself a kind of ruin amid ruins traversing the hell within his own heart,” Gleckner, p. 57. It is a description which is nowhere more true of the poet-narrator himself than in this stanza, and it is the poet-narrator who subsequently describes himself as “a ruin amidst ruins” in canto IV (IV. 25: 219).

<sup>40</sup> Gavin Hopps writes eloquently of Byron as a poet “fascinated by the in-between” whose writing enacts “ontological trespasses.” “Shades of Being: Byron and the Trespassing of Ontology,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 48; 52. Here we see the poet as participant in just such an ontological blurring of distinctions.

<sup>41</sup> Charles E. Robinson, in proposing a shift in Byron’s feelings about “poetry dictated by a transcendental vision of Nature” following a meeting with Shelley during the writing of canto III, presents Byron’s attitude to such moments of “meditation” in cantos I and II as characterised by either “disparage[ment]” or the meditations swiftly being “rendered functionless.” It seems to me, however, that it would be difficult to characterise Byron’s contemplation of ruin in these lines in such terms. *The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight*, 18-20.

As Richard Cronin notes, “Greece is for [Byron], as it was for others, a nation shrunk into a memento mori.”<sup>42</sup> “Shrunk” is rightly suggestive of diminution, yet, in its shrinking, Greece’s ruined state offers the creative potential of communion with the poet’s consciousness of precisely the kind suggested by the ascription “memento mori.” Tilottama Rajan has suggested that a strain of Romantic poetic making might fruitfully be seen as heuristic, and in Chapter Six I offer some qualification to this characterisation; here, though, in relation to Byron, just as in Chapter Six in relation to a particular moment of Shelley’s poetic making in *Prometheus Unbound*, the idea that “the actualization of the work’s significance is displaced from the text itself to the reading process”<sup>43</sup> has clear value. What is particularly fascinating about this moment, however, is that the participants in Rajan’s contended “supplement[ation]” are not the vitalisingly hermeneutically-incomplete text and its reader but the vitalisingly hermeneutically-incomplete plastic artefact of ekphrasis and the poet-figure himself, with the text – that is to say, Byron’s verse – as the product of that heuristic interaction.

The “labour’d” in “time hath labour’d to deface” speaks less of indiscriminate entropy than of a paradoxically constructive destruction: there is something meaningful in the scene as it exists in the here and now; a rightness to its half-made, half-unmade state. What Byron is asking to do is to “trace”: not to reproduce perfectly but to render imperfectly. As with the Preface’s phrase “attempted to be sketched,” which we encountered in Chapter One, we should see more than mere rhetorical humility in his

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<sup>42</sup> *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*, 137.

<sup>43</sup> “The Supplement of Reading,” *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 573-94 (580).

choice of words regarding his intention. He knows that “it may not be,” but what “may not be” is not, perhaps, as clear as it might seem. “Latent grandeur” is a curious description, speaking not of a lost grandeur which may be restored but of potential, of dormant grandeur which may be realised in the future or teased into being. It is the mediated description of the present scene, constructed with and through the poet’s pen, which has the potential for grandeur, however imperfectly rendered – or, to put it another way, in its imperfect rendering lies a latent grandeur.

Ruins offer what the original buildings do not: a catalyst for the mind, a rumination on mortality and history and myth which is, in its consideration of moribundity and decay, paradoxically fecund and vitalising in its proliferation. In the final couplet we have an early example of the “strangers only not regardless pass” notion which Byron returns to at the end of the canto, and it is equally vital and vitalising here. The power of the ruin lies in its state of being both imperfectly there and imperfectly considered, “claim[ing] no passing sigh,” others’ disregard symptomatic of its half-unmade state and its related capacity to create a crucible in which the poet and the mind can operate.

As he moves to considering Britain’s appropriation of Greece’s ruins, he states: “Yet they could violate each saddening shrine, / And bear these altars o’er the long-reluctant brine” (II. 11: 98-99). “Saddening” here suggests both the process of becoming sadder, perhaps through “time’s ... labour[s],” and also something which saddens by its state, that is to say, it operates as a stimulus which acts upon the observer and prompts an emotional response. It is clear, though, that for the majority of observers – those more familiar with it – it is something by which they are “unmov’d,” such that they can “carol by”: for most people, it does not sadden by its state at all. There is, then, a

reciprocal “saddening” occurring, an ensaddening, the poet acting upon the shrine to make it a saddening thing – in fact, to make a new kind of shrine, described as a “sacred shrine” (II. 12: 106) in the next stanza. Byron recreates it in its loss – remakes it in its unmade state: its fallen state is its new-made state.

This capacity for the artefact to offer a space for poetic making specifically through its nature as half-unmade is, I think, a useful way of considering Byron’s poetic making in both *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*. Within his text, the ruin offers a space for the poet’s participation in mutually-enriching creation, the ruin within the text vitalised by its poetic representation and the text vitalised by its poetic engagement with the ruin. Central to this process is the ruin’s and the text’s openness to creativity through its unfinishedness, its resistance to neat completions. The ruin-poet relation here is similar to the poem-reader relation we find at times in Byron’s work, in which the poem’s occasionally pointed-up incompleteness, digressions and resistance to self-enclosed fixity offer a space for the reader to participate heuristically in the text’s creation, as Tilottama Rajan suggests. Jane Stabler offers astute analysis of this quality in Byron’s work, noting “the dialectical relationship between Byron’s readers and his mobile poetic surface”<sup>44</sup> – a relationship forged in the Byronic text’s many forms of “unpredictability” which remain open to the “reader’s ... part in the construction of meaning.”<sup>45</sup> This interactive mutual making between poet and reader of Byron’s texts mirrors the poet’s engagement with ruination within his poem.

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<sup>44</sup> Stabler, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 3.



We have seen the multiple ways in which Byron's text operates to hold onto its own unfinishedness and adopts its own imperfection to vitalising effect. The mobility of water is used to ameliorate the calcifying propensities of the fixed object, yet its unformed mobility is not the panacea the Childe nor the poet-narrator wish it to be. In his destabilisation of the material object Byron shows both his mistrust of all that is systematised and fixed and his desire to keep moving. With such a view, what is sought is a form which maintains its potential formlessness and allows a mobile and vitalising interaction with reader and poet-narrator, and in ruination, valorised not as a less splendid version of its perfected origins but in its own right, perfectly imperfect in its fallen state, Byron finds the appropriate visual representation for what he seeks.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Imaged Lives:

#### Image-Making in *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*

##### I

The present study has suggested that Byron and Shelley place their writing in the fertile ground between the potential failings of non-utterance and the fixed text, and that their writing performatively engages with that placement. For both poets this offers, however imperfectly, to be not just the means through which the complexities of mortal existence can be conveyed but the means through which mortal existence can be most fully experienced – something which Byron memorably expresses early in canto III of *Childe Harold*:

‘Tis to create, and in creating live  
A being more intense, that we endow  
With form our fancy, gaining as we give  
The life we image, even as I do now  
(III. 6: 46-49)<sup>1</sup>

Byron’s lines here remain ever in the present: between the familiar infinitive and deictic constructions lies “creating,” “being” and “gaining,” the second of which we should surely read as possessing the same essential activity as the “being” in the opening to “Ode to the West Wind” (1), an identity indissoluble from and predicated on a state of existence which is less state than process. For both poets a fuller

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<sup>1</sup> These lines are taken from *BCPW* vol. ii, rather than *BMW*. The latter gives line 49 as “the life we imagine, even as I do now.” The lines as stated conform to general editorial consensus.

enactment of existence may be found in the creative act, which must remain mobile in order to fulfil this function.

Line forty-nine emphasises poetic creation as a form of image-making, and this process is often what the two writers' poetry both is and is about. Straddling, chronologically speaking, much of Shelley's poetic output, *Alastor: Or, the Spirit of Solitude* and *Epipsychidion* each have image-making as, to varying degrees, an explicit as well as implicit concern. Both texts involve a projected 'other' existing in complex congress with its own potential discreteness, a congress operating in the ground between the real and the ideal. In one, we are told by the narrator that the Poet "images to himself the Being whom he loves";<sup>2</sup> in the other, the poetic voice seeks to make of "a mortal shape ... an image of some bright Eternity" (112-15).<sup>3</sup>

Byron follows his stanza with self-admonishment and self-protection, stating that he "must ... think less wildly" because having "thought / Too long and darkly" his "brain became / In its own eddy boiling and o'erwrought, / A whirling gulf of phantasy and fame" (III. 7: 55-60). Faced with a shared propensity for thinking "wildly," Byron tends towards seeking movement *out of* and *from* whilst Shelley's instinctual response is *into* and *through*; both, however, employ, as a strategy for dealing with such wildness, a qualified and complex separating out, a figuring of an imperfectly conceived and unstable 'other' as a way of making sense of the "whirling gulf[s]." For

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<sup>2</sup> *Alastor: Or, the Spirit of Solitude*, Preface, SMW, 93.

<sup>3</sup> *Epipsychidion*.

Byron this manifests itself in self-making and text-making. For Shelley, the tendency is toward image-making.

Yet the act of outward projection attendant on image-making is an inherently fraught task for Shelley in that, in seeking to hold in the imaginative space of the poem a discrete figured other, the poet risks a subsumation of the generative mobility which is, for him, essential to maintaining both his poetry's representativeness of existence and the poetry's role as enactment of a "more intense" form of "being." It is an imperative whose roots are to be found in Shelley's perception of the world and the mind as themselves essentially mobile, and one whose provenance and wider manifestation it is worth pausing to consider before we address its uneasy relation to image-making in the two poems.

## II

For Shelley, operations of mind and universe are equally mobile: believing that "everything is in animation,"<sup>4</sup> he seeks to enact that belief through language in defiance of language's propensity to fix and deaden. His words also reflect a form of the Byronic multidirectionality noted in Chapters One and Three: motion as not just enactment of imaginative fecundity but generative of it, and as such there is value in viewing the Shelleyan poem less as an imperfectly worked-through distillation of thought – the implicit success criteria, perhaps, against which New Criticism has viewed his work and found it wanting – than as a crucible for thought, holding the

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<sup>4</sup> *LPBS*, vol. i, 269.

operations of reciprocating motion and mind as best it may in the imperfect medium of linguistic utterance.

Mobility of process-upon-process is, then, part of not just a Shelleyan poetics but a Shelleyan conception of the world, something we see in embryo in such early works as *Queen Mab* and *Zainab and Kathema*, the opening stanza of the latter being a case in point:

Through gathering tears the Sun's departing ray  
In coldness o'er his shuddering spirit past  
And all unfelt the breeze of evening came  
That fanned with quivering wing his wan cheek's feeble flame.  
(3-6)

We have encountered similar descriptions in Byron. Whilst the lines set out two processes – the sun's ray passing through Kathema's tears over his spirit, and the breeze's wing fanning his cheek's flame – we see that tears, rays, spirit and breeze's wing are all themselves in motion, be it “gathering” (3), “departing” (3), “shuddering” (4), or “quivering” (6), fixity eluding us at every turn just as, as Bloom notes, in the first stanza of the “Hymn” “all of the natural citation is wavering: summer winds, moonbeams, colour of the evening sky, clouds ....”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bloom, 37.

There is in Shelley's poetry a suspicion of the fixed. Words are often imbued with an internal motility: the "influencings" (38) and "imaginings" (143) of "Mont Blanc," the "successions" (383) of *Adonais*, the "beamings" (2. 36) of *Queen Mab* and the "pantings" (11) of *Alastor* effectively act upon themselves in a congress between motion and stasis, their effects similar to the interaction discussed in Chapter Two between "being" and "Autumn" (1) in the opening to "Ode to the West Wind." Additionally, stasis is often described in terms which hold motion's absence almost as a presence: in *Zainab and Kathema* we have the "glow ... / Fad[ing] from every moveless cloud" (49-50); in *Queen Mab* the "restless gossamer / Sleep[ing] on the moveless air" (1. 120-21) and "the dark blue orbs" "remain[ing]" "moveless" (9. 235), "this moveless scene" (4. 4) and "the moveless pillar" (4. 142), in which "the wintry storm" is "brave[d]" "movelessly" (7. 262-63), in each case the spirit of motion being evoked in its very denial. Tilottama Rajan describes the Spirit in the "Hymn" as "a presence ... conceived only as absence, a being that is accessible only as nothingness,"<sup>6</sup> and Bloom notes "presences ... revealed as being absences" in the "Ode".<sup>7</sup> Repeatedly in Shelley, absence of motion is conveyed in a way which resolutely fails to grant the state of stillness autonomy from its antonym.<sup>8</sup>

Such ubiquity of motion even as motion's absence is suggested is seen in *Queen Mab*'s description of the body and soul, in which the latter "ever changing ... / Wantons in endless being" (1. 150-51) whilst the former, initially counterpointed as possessing

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<sup>6</sup> Rajan, *Dark Interpreter*, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Bloom notes that "as the wind drives on, the presences of earth, sky and sea are revealed as being mostly absences," *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford UP, 1975), 149.

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Webb touches on similar observations in relation to prefixes and suffixes in "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*," noting that "for a poet who was committed to an essentially optimistic philosophy Shelley had an extraordinary predilection for the negative," *Shelley Revalued*, 37-62, 37.

“features ... fixed and meaningless” (1. 141) – a telling juxtaposition of adjectives in the context of our study – is then revealed to be imbued with “animal life,” with “every organ ... perform[ing] / Its natural functions” (1. 142-44). Mobility abounds in the poem:

Earth’s distant orb appeared  
...  
Whilst round the chariot’s way  
Innumerable systems rolled,  
And countless spheres diffused  
An ever-varying glory.

(1. 250-54)<sup>9</sup>

He writes of “countless and unending orbs / In mazy motion intermingled” (2. 72-73), states that:

a mountain’s weight  
Is active, living spirit. Every grain  
Is sentient both in unity and part,  
And the minutest atom comprehends  
A world of loves and hatreds,”

(4. 142-46)

and describes “the minutest molecule of light, / ... in an April sunbeam’s fleeting glow (6. 174-75).

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<sup>9</sup> Shelley’s note to these lines continue the focus on essential mobility: “The plurality of worlds,—the indefinite immensity of the universe, is a most awful subject of contemplation. ... That which appears only like a thin and silvery cloud streaking the heaven, is in effect composed of innumerable clusters of suns, each shining with its own light, and illuminating numbers of planets that revolve around them. Millions and millions of suns are ranged around us, all attended by innumerable worlds, yet calm, regular, and harmonious, all keeping the paths of immutable necessity,” *SMW*, 71-72.

A particular vein of criticism will rightly hear Lucretian Epicureanism in these lines, and we know that Shelley in correspondence paraphrased Spinoza paraphrasing Lucretius<sup>10</sup> and both read<sup>11</sup> and borrowed from<sup>12</sup> *De Rerum Natura*. However, there is in the works of some critics, notably Hogle<sup>13</sup> and Roberts,<sup>14</sup> a rather deterministic approach: a critical tendency to view such influence as deriving from the clear lens of reason, the “mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another” – to co-opt Shelley’s words from *A Defence of Poetry* – rather than acknowledging its particular appropriation and modification through the poet’s imagination, the “mind, acting upon” Lucretian theory “so as to colour [it] with its own light”<sup>15</sup> – a light which, as we have seen, has certain propensities in relation to motion and stasis. For in much the same way that a mountain might affirm different things to different poets,<sup>16</sup> so might the implications of atomism be in the eye of the beholder, intimating ultimate fixity or constant flux, a nihilistic conception or a life-affirming one, the hypothetical reducibility and knowableness of things or things as, in practical terms, unknowable.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In an 1811 letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg, Shelley writes of a hypothetical conversation with a materialist regarding the origins of the universe, proclaiming “I will answer in the words of Spinoza...,” before expounding elements of *De Rerum Natura*. *LPBS*, vol. i, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Edmund Blunden writes of the strength of the “example” of the “calm grandeur” of Lucretius “in the working brain of the young Shelley.” *Shelley: A Life Story* (Glasgow: Collins, 1948), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Amongst several examples in his work, an extract from *De Rerum Natura* forms one of the epigraphs to *Queen Mab*. *SMW*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Hogle, *passim* but especially 32-49.

<sup>14</sup> *Chaos of History*, *passim*.

<sup>15</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, *SMW*, 674.

<sup>16</sup> See Introduction, footnote 34.

<sup>17</sup> This capacity for atomism to generate subjective and seemingly contrary implications predates fully-conceptualised atomism itself. Just as Lucretius worked from the inheritance of Epicurus and Epicurus from the inheritance of Democritus and Leucippus, so Democritus and Leucippus were theorising from the interrogation of the concept of the fixed and immutable undertaken by Parmenides and Heraclitus. Where Heraclitus saw the immutable in the motion of constant flux, Parmenides postulated the necessity of an immutable fixed substance unknown to us within this flux; essentially similar points but through differing conceptual lenses. See Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2001), 80-94, for a discussion of differing responses to atomism.



Notwithstanding the comprehensiveness of their respective approaches, both critics might be said to mistake cause for effect, seeing Shelley's appropriation of Lucretian Epicureanism as more generative of his thinking than symptomatic of it, thus neglecting full consideration of why that appropriation took a particular form which was more in the mould of a Heraclitean *logos* of motion and process<sup>18</sup> than a "Parmenidean obsession with the static,"<sup>19</sup> despite the latter's relative contemporary currency.<sup>20</sup> My study, like the studies of Roberts and Hogle, points towards Shelley largely, though not entirely, eschewing this dominant implication in favour of one which accords more closely with his views regarding the potential tyranny of rigidity: the concept of the *clinamen*<sup>21</sup> is, for example, rightly explored in enlightening ways by both critics in relation to the poet's work,<sup>22</sup> yet neither fully admits the selective theoretical swerve that the very concept of the *clinamen* involves,<sup>23</sup> nor the

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<sup>18</sup> Heraclitus attributed eternity not to a primary substance but to the universal Logos. He conceived the universe as a ceaseless conflict of opposites regulated by an unchanging law, noting: "people do not understand how what is at variance accords ... with itself, an agreement in tension as with bow and lyre." Fragment Fifty-One of Heraclitus' treatise, as quoted in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970), 500.

<sup>19</sup> Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, 63.

<sup>20</sup> Midgley characterises the dominant response to the theory as follows: "morally ... atomism seemed to point ... not only away from religion but also away from communal thinking and towards social atomism – that is, towards individualism. And for scientific knowledge itself, atomism seemed to promise a most reassuring kind of simplicity and finality – a guarantee that the world would prove intelligible in the end in relatively simple terms, once we had split it up into its ultimate elements." *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>21</sup> I refer here to the *clinamen* in the Lucretian rather than Bloomian sense. Lucretius writes: "When the atoms are traveling straight down through empty space by their own weight, at quite indeterminate times and places they swerve ever so little from their course, just so much that you can call it a change of direction. If it were not for this swerve, everything would fall downwards like rain-drops through the abyss of space. No collision would take place.... Thus nature would never have created anything," Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, transl. R. E. Latham (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 43.

<sup>22</sup> For Hogle, for example, the *clinamen* is central to his reading of "Mont Blanc" as well as a crucial element in much of his discussion of "transference" in Shelley; likewise, Roberts writes extensively of the concept in relation to Shelley and the operations of poetry generally. Hogle, 73-79; *Chaos of History*, 440-42; 474-85.

<sup>23</sup> "[Atomism] concentrates so strongly on the atoms themselves that it has nothing much to say about how they are related. We naturally ask what forces are making the atoms move. But on this point the atomists were parsimonious to the point of meanness. ... [Lucretius] did add the idea of the *clinamen* or bend ... but that seems only to have been a defence against the objection that otherwise they might ... never meet at all. No reason was given for the slant, and since the atoms have no working parts it is hard to see how there could be any such reason. The atoms collided and sometimes got hooked together, but they never truly interacted. ... One way and another, then, change had not really been explained at all," Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, 62.

concomitant swerve in Shelley which leads them there. Lucretian Epicureanism does not admit irresistibly to any single conclusion drawn from it, and our interest must lie in the poet's fecund failure to fall resolutely on either side of its contrary implications in a manner entirely at one with the characteristics we have identified in the poet's works thus far, affording a generative poetics of vitalising libration between the conflicting propensities of discrete identity and dissolution.

### III

There lies a rub, and it is in the fact that, for all Shelley's rejection of stasis, the processes of poetic making and imaginative figuration involve recourse to imperfect linguistic tools which incline towards fixed meaning and, in *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*, the imaging of constructs which do the same. Consequently, evocation is a risky and potentially ever-self-defeating business, attempting to hold in loose suspension creations which Shelley simultaneously hopes to imbue with a vital mobility at odds with that suspension. The poet is ever aware of the capacity of creation-through-language to conjure static icons constructed of and as fixed signifiers, thus enacting a replacing of the rigid hierarchy much of his poetry seeks to challenge with rigid hierarchies of his own.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, as with a Parmenidean-Heraclitean conception of atomism, much of what Shelley creates holds within it the possibility of separateness and dissolution. In both *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion* this tension constitutes both process and theme.

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<sup>24</sup> This particular tension, and the question of how to break such a cycle, is essential to both *Prometheus Unbound* and my discussion of the poem in Chapter Six.

Germane to each of these poems is the peculiar ontological status of an image which is reflected, refracted, projected or bodied forth from a still-existing point of origin: such an image must hold within it both that which it re-presents and its status as other from that which it re-presents; it is in a sense both the thing and not the thing, defined – like all words but in a way which impinges more on our consciousness – by that which it is not and that which it is like. Consequently, like intellectual beauty and the west wind, it lends itself as a ready metaphor for particular conceptions of language (Saussurrean semiotics) and particular conceptions of perception (Platonism). If it is true that these conceptions are united by a sense of a void between a thing's essential nature and its particular more knowable representation, then it is equally true that the fertile imaginative territory we have seen this void afford is very much in evidence in these poems, as is the destabilising of both that void's existence and certainties regarding which side might be – like the “day” seen in the “waves” of Baiae's bay in the “Ode to the West Wind” – “intenser” (34). In an imagistic corollary to Byron's tendency towards figurative language destabilising its own internal hierarchies of vehicle and tenor, Shelley seeks to create figured others possessed of both a qualified discreteness and a mobility at once outward-reaching and internalised. As such, each poem engages processes of separation and otherness, not just in the sense that each poem involves the poetic figuration of an ‘other’ – in *Alastor*, the “imag[ing]” of the “Being” as distinct from the Poet; in *Epipsychidion* the imaging of an idealisation as distinct from the ostensible subject, Teresa Viviani – but in the sense that the poems performatively interrogate and explore figuration itself and the instabilities of those figurations as, or as not, discrete identities.

Let us look at a particularly Shelleyan construction in *Alastor* which has been the subject of significant critical attention: the Poet hearing the voice of the “veiled maid” (151) “stifled in tremulous sobs / Subdued by its own pathos” (164-5), and, a few lines later, seeing “by the warm light of their own life / Her glowing limbs” (175-6). Such constructions, in evidence in *Epipsychidion*,<sup>25</sup> *Adonais*,<sup>26</sup> the *Triumph of Life*<sup>27</sup> and elsewhere, are described by Keach as “reflexive imagery,”<sup>28</sup> by Empson as “self-inwoven similes,”<sup>29</sup> and are close kin to what Timothy Morton describes as the “autophor”<sup>30</sup> in Shelley.

With the second *Alastor* example, Keach feels that “the point ... is, I think, that the very same power is responsible for the life of those limbs and for the fact of their being ‘seen’ – namely, the protagonist’s imagination,” contending that Shelley wishes to suggest that “the ‘light’ with which the dream-maiden’s limbs ‘glow’ comes from the mind which creates and perceives them.”<sup>31</sup> The observation is correct in that Keach is right to suggest that “the reflexive locution signals a self-inclosed psychical experience,”<sup>32</sup> but he fails to concede that it equally signals the opposite, the “light of their own life” (175) suggesting self-sustaining autonomy from the perceiver at least as much as it suggests unity, even if, in typical Shelleyan style, we might feel in the

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<sup>25</sup> “The Moon ... hid[ing] the night / From its own darkness” (287-8).

<sup>26</sup> Pleasure ... led by the gleam / Of her own dying smile” (114-5).

<sup>27</sup> “People” (45) walking “mournfully within the gloom / / Of their own shadow” (58-9); “a chariot on the silent storm / Of its own rushing splendour” (86-7).

<sup>28</sup> Keach defines such imagery as “locutions in which an object or action is compared, implicitly or explicitly, to an aspect of itself, or is said to act upon or under the conditions of an aspect of itself,” Keach, 79.

<sup>29</sup> Empson, whose judgement of such usages is less positive than that of Keach, suggests that: “when not being able to think of a comparison fast enough he compares the thing to a vaguer or more abstract notion of itself, or points out that it is its own nature, or that it sustains itself by supporting itself,” *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 160-61.

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Morton, “Introduction,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Keach, 82.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

construction's convolution an insecurity in the assertion. The mobility within Shelley's image-making is multivalent, pointing simultaneously and paradoxically towards the singularity – the sameness – *and* the separating – the discrete otherness – of Poet and maid.

The bent of mobility in these lines rests less in a movement to conflate, or blur the distinction between, Poet and veiled maid (though it certainly at least glances towards just that), and more in a separation, but one which speaks of the separated figure as itself a place of process of the kind we found in the soul and body in *Queen Mab*, the interaction here not between Poet and maid but between the maid's own processes of mind and body, part of a conceit which begins a number of lines earlier and includes the earlier reflexive image. Keach sees this earlier image as "suggest[ing] the degree to which the dreamer's mind is determining the nature of what it projects,"<sup>33</sup> yet it does this whilst simultaneously conveying how mind and body interact in the operations of "kindl[ing]" (162) desire within one person: the "solemn mood / Of her pure mind" (161-2) suggesting a suppressive "subdu[ing]" (165) which evokes a physical counter-response whose "fire" (163) manifests itself in the "rais[ing]" of "wild numbers" (163-4) which is then acted upon by the mind's "solemn" (161) "pathos" (165) – an interaction which creates the "tremulous sobs" (164) as one imperfectly "stifl[es]" (164) the other. Indeed, the intervolving of physicality, intellect and emotion in phrases such as "eloquent blood" (168) and "as if her heart impatiently endured / Its bursting burden" (173-4) may point us towards a more subtle interaction than simply mind and body: "subdued by its own pathos" (165) in particular at least

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<sup>33</sup> Keach, 83.

gestures towards the kind of internal tussle between the concepts of *anima*, *animus* and *mens* as considered by Epicurus and Lucretius.

However, whilst the nuances of such lines' leanings towards separation or conflation are fascinating and worthy subjects of exploration and discussion, attendance to, as it were, the particular direction of the clinamen's bent seems to miss the lines' wider function and significance. The lines operate as qualified and self-complicating valorisation of the autotelism of agency itself paradoxically vitalised not through (to use an appropriately self-inclosed construction) the motion of its own motion but through its subtle interaction with the half-conjured immobilities of delineated status, whether that delineated status be one of discrete delineation (the Poet and veiled maid as indubitably distinct and different entities) or inseparable interactivity (the Poet and veiled maid as indubitably one and the same). This – by which I mean this study's critical apprehension of Shelley's work, and also Shelley's work itself – is neither an acceding to a Derridean endless deconstruction nor is it a conventional search for the fixities of meaning, but an acknowledgement that the text both is and is about the activity of its negotiation between these two potentialities.

Like the stanza from *Zainab and Kathema*, like the “waving”<sup>34</sup> similes of the “Hymn” and like the Heraclitean atomism seen in telescope and microscope alike, the focus is qualified process: elements of the veiled maid are engaged in their own processes even as they engage in process with each other, even as the veiled maid and

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<sup>34</sup> Bloom, 37.

Poet engage in process, even as – Wasserman’s dualistic contention notwithstanding<sup>35</sup> – Poet engages in process with the Narrator-figure of the poem’s beginning and end,<sup>36</sup> and as the poem as a whole might be said to engage in process with its own Preface. Shelley’s verse moves in several directions at once, each movement involving processes of their own which themselves are alive with internal contrarian impulses. Shelley conveys the Poet and the veiled maid as both different and the same, with the interaction between the maid’s internal interactions and the “strange symphony” (167) from “some strange harp” (166) forming another complex interweaving of agency and oscillation between separation and unity, and one whose interaction is outwards from its own construction as well as inwards into it – that is to say, it is at once “self-inwoven,” “self-inclosed” (as Empson and Keach respectively have it) whilst also resonating as a reflection, a mirror-image, of the Poet’s initial encountering of the maid. The passive construction of “the beating of her heart was heard to fill / The pauses of her music” (169-70) lays a focus on the perceiver and thus points up the potentially solipsistic nature of the Poet’s experience only for “sudden she rose” (172) to intimate her discrete existence, an onto-epistemological dialogue which inverts the way in which, a few lines earlier, the passive construction of “a vision on his sleep / There came” (149-50) suggests the maid’s discrete identity as a vision arriving from elsewhere, only for “he dreamed a veiled maid” (151) to nod towards solipsism.

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<sup>35</sup> Wasserman, 18-34. Wasserman is right, I think, to see the Narrator and Poet as interacting in interesting ways and he is right, too, that such interaction is of interest to any exploration of Shelley’s views on idealism and skepticism. However, the marked separateness of Narrator and Poet which Wasserman proposes seems difficult to justify in relation to the text as a whole.

<sup>36</sup> In contrast with Wasserman’s view, it seems more appropriate to concede, with Stuart Sperry, that “although briefly distinguished from the Poet at the outset, the Narrator has continued such a close and sympathetic observer that his character has seemed virtually submerged in that of Shelley’s hero,” albeit with a caveat of a considered emphasis on the “virtually” therein. Stuart Sperry, *Shelley’s Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (London: Harvard UP, 1988), 38. Hereafter, Sperry.

Such ostensibly reflexive formulations, then, point outwards as well as inwards, and in their inward operations they suggest that the elements of mobile interconnection are themselves *essentially* vital, part of a poetics in which nothing is reducible to an ultimate fixity yet which paradoxically holds such a possibility as part of that irreducibility: where Blake writes of a Urizenic search for “a solid without fluctuation” (62)<sup>37</sup> we sense in Shelley the reverse. Poetry as concentric synecdoche: the internally-motile text as synecdochical of ubiquitous mobility in a world in which motion is mind, constructions within the text as synecdochical of the text, and, as we pare down further, we find that individual words (such as the plural gerunds “imaginings” (143) and “influencings” (38) discussed above) operate internally as these constructions in microcosm, the stable and solid constitutive stuff of poetry indefinable outside of its own motion.

In Chapter Two I explored in the lyrics the capacity of words to look in more than one direction, to point up a multiplicity of meanings and to ally themselves to multiple referents without conclusively attaching to any one. This is very much the case with the description in *Alastor* of the Poet “fold[ing] his frame in her dissolving arms” (187), in which “dissolving” is itself subject to multiform semantic dissolution. The line admits, to varying degrees, to the possibility of the following: that her arms are dissolving, disappearing as the vision fades and is “swallowed up” (189) as we see in the lines that follow;<sup>38</sup> that his frame is “folding” and “dissolving” into her, and *vice versa*, in ontological union because Poet and maid are one and the same; that they are

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<sup>37</sup> William Blake, “The First Book of Urizen” (2. 20), *The Complete Works of William Blake*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 244.

<sup>38</sup> “Now blackness veiled — his dizzy eyes, and night / Involved and swallowed up the vision” (187-88).



in psychical union because she is a projection from him, he having “image[d] to himself the Being whom he loves,” having sought “in vain for a prototype of his conception;”<sup>39</sup> that they are in sexual union which may or may not be narcissistic autoeroticism, that is to say, she, “herself a poet” (161) whose “voice was like the voice of his own soul” (153) is a projection from him of him (but then, the “like” gives us pause ...); that her arms possess the agency of “dissolving” rather than being dissolved themselves, such that they act to dissolve his frame;<sup>40</sup> that the verb operates reflexively to dis-solve, that is, to break down certainties, to open up multiple interpretations; and, perhaps, on. The “dissolving” of the line denotes entropy as we might commonly conceive it and yet the line as a whole and the word “frame” in particular suggests an *entroping*, a pointing up of the Poet as a creation, a conceit, a representational trope<sup>41</sup> – an alterising, a reflexive sense of the Poet itself as a construct. Wolfson is correct that the “poetic practices” of the Romantic poem “are alert to form as a construction”;<sup>42</sup> it is an alertness which extends not just to poetic form but to the formation of imaged figures within the formed and forming text – “frame[s]” within frames, and framings within framings, performatively engaging with the constructedness of their constructions.

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<sup>39</sup> *Alastor*, Preface, *SMW*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Keach, in relation to the recurrence of “language of dissolving” in Shelley, notes that, as we see here, “sometimes ... it seems to function in both its transitive and intransitive senses simultaneously,” and that such language emphasizes the poet’s “affinity for moments which may be said to turn upon the question of whether something disappears when it transforms itself or is transformed into something else,” Keach, 125-26.

<sup>41</sup> Hogle also notes that “entropy, in the full literal sense of *en-trope* (a ‘being-in-the-process-of-turning’ from structure to structure rather than just a winding down of one structure)” has its applications in Shelley’s work (Hogle, 44). Whilst Hogle considers the term more in relation to Shelley’s response to the “sense[d] ... conflict between [metaphysical or philosophical] postures” (p 44), in relation to the present discussion the poems enact a performative “‘being-in-the-process-of-turning’” from the “structures” of Poet and maid in *Alastor*, and from the “structures” of Emilia as biographically real and representationally ideal.

<sup>42</sup> Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, 23.

Examples such as this accord with Stephen Behrendt's application of the concept of the multistable image to Shelley's work, though we must, I think, take his observation a step further. Whilst it is true that "the attraction and delight of the multistable image" lies in part in the fact that "it conveys multiple messages simultaneously so that the artist or author who employs the device communicates at once on more than one level,"<sup>43</sup> the complexity of the reader's affective response to this consists only partly in the perception of several meanings in and of themselves: as with my consideration in Chapter Two of the "vale of tears" (17) in the "Hymn," we must admit an additional metaresponse which involves a heightened awareness of the instability and potential for unending instability in all meaning, all language.

In exploring both Shelley's tendency towards image-making and the tendency towards subtilized interrogation of its processes and outcomes – that is to say, Shelley's particular mode of image-making as one which seeks to do two ostensibly mutually conflicting things simultaneously, namely create something both fixed and mobile, discrete and intervolved – we should note once again not only the multidirectional nature of these tendencies *themselves* but also the multiple ways in which the tendencies manifest themselves within a 'text', holistically conceived. Just as in Chapter One I explored how *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* enacts forms of mobility on several operative levels at once, with individual linguistic constructions enacting in microcosm the wider text's inter/intratextual mobility as it plays out between Preface, dedicatory verses, notes, Spenserian stanza and differentiated verse forms, so we find in *Alastor* an enactment of image-making which moves beyond the text's internal

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<sup>43</sup> Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 2.

figurative constructions and extends to encompass a performative attendance to an awareness that poetic creation – text-making – is itself a form of image-making. In *Alastor*, this manifests itself within and between title, Preface, epigraphic materials, and the narrator-figure of the first forty-nine lines, as well as in fundamental operations of the poem itself such as the simultaneity of discreteness and intervolving between Poet and place – topography as at once landscape and psychoscape. These elements of the wider text tend, both within and between themselves, towards the imperfectly-realised status of imaged projections interrogative of their own imaging: like Byron’s ruins, if they are realised as anything it is as powerful embodiments of vitalisingly imperfect realisation.

The title is a case in point: unlike, for example, with Keats’ *Isabella: or, The Pot of Basil*, the title’s conditional “or” pivots us between nomenclatures which are themselves ambiguous in both nature and referent – what both “Alastor” and “the Spirit of Solitude” *mean* and *refer to* are subject to question. The Preface, whose oft-overlooked status as belonging to the *Alastor* volume rather than the poem itself acts as a further complication, is repeatedly self-qualifying: the “may be considered as” of its opening sentence is doubly hedged, both “be considered as” and its qualifying auxiliary signposting alternative routes of understanding in relation to a mode of apprehension which is itself counter to our usual understanding – as O’Neill notes, the poem is allegorical “not because its details can be translated easily into abstractions, but because it is engaged in an attempt to find verbal equivalents for inner states.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> O’Neill, 13.

As it progresses the Preface expresses complicated reciprocations of mutual agency of the kind encountered in the lyrics explored in Chapter Two. In the phrase “led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic,”<sup>45</sup> “led forth by” suggests an acceding of agency whose connotations shy from pejoration: there is a stateliness, a kind of conscious relinquishment which paradoxically *affords* a particular kind of passive agency, of the kind encountered in “Ode to the West Wind,” and one which the present study has argued that both Byron and Shelley employ in relation to language – the agency to choose to accede agency. Yet ostensibly the imagination is doubly passive here – at least, again, of a certain kind of passivity: passive because it is led forth, and passive because it is acted upon by “all that is excellent and majestic” – but the phrase “through familiarity with” cheats us away from such convictions through suggesting something more mutual, a kind of osmosis rather than passivity worked upon by activity, as “all that is excellent and majestic” is not quite given the agency and control it at first seems to possess.

It is a complexity which continues with the description of “the magnificence of the external world sink[ing] profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and afford[ing] to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted”: like the phrase “through familiarity with” above, “sinks profoundly into” is a construction which ameliorates a hierarchy of activity the one upon the other, whilst “frame of his conceptions” suggests that the vessel which receives does not so much act to modify as modifies by its own nature and shape – it is passive, but its nature modifies. The “affords to their modifications” of the next sentence seems to support this: the magnificence and beauty

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<sup>45</sup> SMW, 92.

of the external world modifies and is modified in turn by the coming together of the nature of each.

Within the Preface, then, we have simultaneous movement towards and shying from both the indissolubility of and the relational activity or passivity of different elements, imaged forth in such a way that their embodiment is wrapped in their own indistinctness. All of these interactions are couched within a framework of self-consciousness and qualified separation. Its status as Preface to the volume as a whole notwithstanding, the phrase “the poem entitled ‘Alastor’”<sup>46</sup> with which the Preface begins serves to point up the text’s constructedness in a way which the rest of the Preface repeatedly reinforces: Shelley, for example, clings to the phrase “it represents,” most notably with the distancing construction of “the Poet is represented as”<sup>47</sup> – the convolution is reminiscent of the phrase “attempted to be sketched”<sup>48</sup> which Byron uses in his prefatory materials to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* – half way between enacting the established tropes of self-deprecatory Preface-writing and a more meaningful and deliberate attention to image-making. Thus the multidirectional and shifting locutions and interrelations of the text itself find themselves reflected within several layers of that which we may holistically conceive as ‘the text’.

#### IV

Part of our response to the tension we sense between dissolution and separateness in the “self-inwoven” line from *Alastor* lies in its rippling out to be indicative of the same

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>48</sup> *BMW*, 19.

tension in the text as a whole, and it is this same tension which vitalises *Epipsychidion*, and one which is apparent from the outset:

Sweet Spirit! Sister of that orphan one,  
Whose empire is the name thou weepest on,  
In my heart's temple I suspend to thee  
These votive wreaths of withered memory.  
(1-4)

The identity of the “Sweet Spirit!” is at once straightforward and vexed: the line points us towards it being the soul or spirit of Teresa Viviani,<sup>49</sup> yet the religious overtones of “temple” and “votive” act upon “Spirit” and destabilise the firmness of such attribution, even as “Sweet” does enough to hold it as the primary meaning. Where in the lines from *Alastor* above the seat of mobile congress in image-making is in the otherness or otherwise of the maid, in *Epipsychidion* the seat of mobile congress lies in the imaged figure as real or ideal, sublunary or ethereal.

As I touched upon in Chapter Two’s discussion of the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” “Spirit” is an ambiguous term which may signify an individual, an individual’s spirit, the essence of an idealised abstraction, something less ineffable yet inevitably at one remove from an idealised abstraction, or an embodiment of an idealised abstraction in an individual. In *Epipsychidion*, Emily may stake fair claim to being all of these things, which is to say none of them completely, a complexity far from ameliorated by the fact that “Sweet Spirit” is one of more than two dozen epithets Shelley tries on for size

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<sup>49</sup> This is, I think, the case whether the “orphan one” of which she is the “sister” is the soul or spirit of Shelley or Mary.

in the first seventy or so lines in “a veritable fireworks display of alternate images, rejected as swiftly as they are pronounced”<sup>50</sup> in a manner similar to the similes we encountered in the first stanza of the “Hymn.” Indeed, the comparison to the “Hymn” is germane in the question it raises: if in the “Hymn” such a device is part of the “first stanza [being] at pains to emphasise the intangibility and mutability of its subject,”<sup>51</sup> how might we reconcile this with a subject which is, at least in part, a specific person, albeit in poetically idealised form and notwithstanding the fictionalising of the Advertisement? While Richard Holmes is right to see the poem as “the most nakedly autobiographical poem [Shelley] ever wrote,”<sup>52</sup> as “at one level ... quite simply and openly an autobiography of Shelley’s love life,”<sup>53</sup> it is also engaged in an unstable conceptualising of its subject as both specific individual and idealisation. The complexity of Shelley’s conception of the “almost but not quite abstract figure of Emily”<sup>54</sup> is complicated further by a focus on one love-object in a poem which valorises a rejection of a focus on one love-object, and further still by the poet’s seeking to dissolve the very distinction between poet and object.

Shelley described the poem to John Gisborne in words which have resonance too for *Alastor*:

It is an idealized history of my life and feelings. I think one is always in love with something or other; the error, and I confess it is not easy for spirits cased

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<sup>50</sup> Bloom, 210. O’Neill, too, describes them as a “firework-display of figures,” O’Neill, 160.

<sup>51</sup> Bloom, 37.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1974), 635.

<sup>53</sup> *Shelley on Love: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Holmes (London: Anvil Press, 1980), 205.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy Moore Goslee, “Dispersing Emily: Drafting as Plot in *Epipsychidion*,” *SPP*, 735-47, 737.

in flesh and blood to avoid it, consists in seeking in a mortal image the likeness of what is, perhaps, eternal.<sup>55</sup>

*Epipsychidion* bears this out inasmuch as we see the poet “rashly” seeking “in many mortal forms” (267) “the shadow of that idol of my thought” (268) in a “cryptically but obviously biographical”<sup>56</sup> poeticised allegory which we may, as Kenneth Neill Cameron has shown,<sup>57</sup> correlate in some detail to Shelley’s experiences, certainly sufficient for it to be uncomfortable reading for Mary.<sup>58</sup> Yet both poem and subject defy easy categorisation: just as one critic may include it in a study of “the narrative and dramatic poetry”<sup>59</sup> and another refer to it as a “great swollen lyric,”<sup>60</sup> so, as O’Neill observes, “the lines adroitly refuse to allow priority to a ‘spiritual’ or a ‘physical’ understanding of Emilia.”<sup>61</sup>

The Advertisement describes the fictionalised writer’s life as “singular” primarily “on account of ... the ideal tinge it received from his own character and feelings”:<sup>62</sup> perhaps the question we should ask is whether the poem imbues real circumstance with an “ideal tinge” or whether it is the ideal which is tinged by the real, or whether we find an imperfect dissolving of the two. Where Bloom states that, more than any other Shelley poem, “biographical fact is necessary for a complete approach” to

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<sup>55</sup> *LPBS*, vol. ii, 363.

<sup>56</sup> Haines, 195.

<sup>57</sup> Kenneth Neill Cameron, “The Planet-Tempest Passage in *Epipsychidion*,” *PMLA* 62 (1947): 1022-42.

<sup>58</sup> It may be merely coincidental that *Epipsychidion* is the only text for which Mary Shelley failed to write accompanying notes when editing the 1839 *Poetical Works*; certainly, though, a letter to Byron in 1822 shows that Mary was stung enough to refer to herself ironically as “now ... truly *cold moonshine*” respectively even after her husband’s death, and her characterization of the relationship in other correspondence as “Italian Platonics” seems in light of this to have a steely ring to it. *LPBS*, vol. i, 284; R. Glynne Grillis, *Mary Shelley: A Biography* (Oxford UP, 1938), 139.

<sup>59</sup> Sperry, *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> Jeffrey C. Robinson, “The Translator,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, 104-122, 117.

<sup>61</sup> O’Neill, 164.

<sup>62</sup> *SMW*, 512.



*Epipsychidion*,<sup>63</sup> Timothy Webb argues that “poetry is not biography and there are certain questions we should not ask of it,” feeling that “the avoidance of specificity was a carefully-considered project” whilst at the same time acknowledging the presence of “elements which seem to pull it towards autobiographical specificity.”<sup>64</sup> These final two points share with Bloom’s comment that “Shelley did not succeed in cutting the poem’s genetic hawsers”<sup>65</sup> an assumption that a movement from specifics was Shelley’s unambiguous intention; that “poetry aspires to a condition in which the mere specificities of fact are transcended.”<sup>66</sup>

The operations of the text are more complex than this.<sup>67</sup> The text not only treads an uncertain middle ground between “*poème à clef*”<sup>68</sup> and something more idealised:<sup>69</sup> it enacts an intertwining of processes operating on a range of levels, in which individuated Emilia, idealised Emilia, Shelley, fictionalised Writer, and poetic persona (which is not quite the same thing as either of the latter two) interact and are transmuted. I agree with Bloom’s contention that “the advertisement ... does not help to comprehend anything of value in the poem”<sup>70</sup> but only insofar as “comprehend” is too strong a word for what we gain from it; it does, however, point up some of the abiding complexities of the poem in relation to the ideal and the real, due to perhaps

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<sup>63</sup> Bloom, 205.

<sup>64</sup> Webb, 54-55.

<sup>65</sup> Bloom, 208.

<sup>66</sup> Webb, 55.

<sup>67</sup> By “text” here I mean the poem including envoy, the “literal translation from Dante’s famous Canzone,” the “Advertisement,” the title, the dedication and the epigraph from Teresa Viviani taken as a whole, and thus a text whose operations might rightly be seen as these elements operating in dialogue with each other as texts-within-texts in the manner of, for example, Keats’s “Eve of St. Mark,” Wordsworth’s “The Thorn” or Felicia Hemans’ “Properzia Rossi.”

<sup>68</sup> *Shelley on Love*, 205.

<sup>69</sup> Bloom sees the first twenty lines, for example, as “suspended between private and public declaration,” Bloom, 209.

<sup>70</sup> Bloom, 208.

its two primary characteristics, which are that it is a fictionalising of the poem's Writer, and that it is not a very convincing one, both of which inform our affective response, our disbelief half-willingly half-suspended.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, statements and relations occupy a space in which they are more than one thing at the same time. It allows us, for example, to read the argument that "the present poem, like the *Vita Nuova* of Dante, is sufficiently intelligible to a certain class of readers without a matter-of-fact history"<sup>72</sup> as censurable defensiveness (by Shelley of his imperfect poem) and admirable defence (by Shelley of another's imperfect poem), the sentence's modified iteration of the sentiments of the "stanza on the opposite page"<sup>73</sup> affording the latter a liminal position between poem and advertisement and thus destabilising the very notion of where the work begins.<sup>74</sup>

The ostensible simplicity of "In my heart's temple I suspend to thee / These votive wreaths of withered memory" (3-4) withers even as we read the lines: the initial feeling that we are presented with the kind of sentiment expressed in Keats's "Ode to Psyche"<sup>75</sup> lingers but is destabilised by the sense that here the fane is built, the region of the mind well-trod, in the light of which the suspending of poetic "wreaths" (4) – a word which holds within it the sense of the woven, constructed, "frail spell" of a text – is less edifying than we at first suppose. The temple is not built to or for Emilia but to or for something else: love, or poetry, or a temple to the heart itself – the

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<sup>71</sup> Hugh Roberts suggests that Shelley's prefaces possess an "openness to being doubted." Hugh Roberts, "Noises On: The Communicative Strategies of Shelley's Prefaces," *The Unfamiliar Shelley*, 183-98, 184.

<sup>72</sup> *SMW*, 512.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

<sup>74</sup> It might be noted that most, though not all (cf. *SMW*), editions of Shelley's work place the title both before the dedication, epigraph, advertisement and stanza from Dante, and again before "Sweet Spirit!"

<sup>75</sup> "Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind" (50-51), *KMW*, 278-80, 280.

idealisations with which she is at once conflated (in her position in the “heart’s temple” (3) and in the wreaths being “suspend[ed] to [her]” (3)) and separated (as merely the subject of “votive wreaths of withered memory” (4) which at once address her, embody her, create her, and offer her up). This complexity points to Emilia both being and not being an idealisation: that is, the lines enact a process, an interaction, involving Emilia-as-Emilia and Emilia-as-idealisation, and do so by combining elements of the operations of both the reflexive imagery and the self-qualifying referential dissolution of “dissolving” (187) in the passage from *Alastor*.

As with the poem’s opening quatrain previously discussed, the poem’s second and third stanzas continue to reveal multiple ambiguities:

This song shall be thy rose: its petals pale  
Are dead, indeed, my adored Nightingale!  
But soft and fragrant is the faded blossom,  
And it has no thorn left to wound thy bosom.

High, spirit-wingèd Heart! Who dost forever  
Beat thine unfeeling bars with vain endeavour,  
Till those bright plumes of thought, in which arrayed  
It oversoared this low and worldly shade  
Lie shattered; ...

(9-17)

The “petals pale” and “dead” and the “faded blossom” suggest a self-deprecating disavowal of the work’s quality by the writer which was begun with “withered memory” (4) and all of which are redolent of the “fading coal”<sup>76</sup> of poetic inspiration,

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<sup>76</sup> “The mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness,” *A Defence of Poetry*, *SMW*, 696-97.

yet in the context of the Advertisement they surely speak of something more, reminding us of the deceased Writer in a way which reads as part constructed poignancy by Shelley and part a slipping of the distinction between poet and Writer of the kind Sperry, as mentioned above, notes in relation to Poet and Narrator in *Alastor*. Similarly, the “Heart” of stanza three may be read as another of the many epithets for Emilia, with the stanza thus continuing the theme of her imprisonment;<sup>77</sup> the lines could also be read as an address to the conflated Writer-poet’s own heart struggling in the unsuccessful process of poetic creation, the “captive bird” in the “narrow cage” (5) metaphor from the previous stanza co-opted for a different use such that the metaphorical Emilia and the Writer-poet are proleptically conflated; and finally, we have Shelley, trapped not only in the physical circumstance of marriage, but as a specific consequence of this unable to give “those bright plumes of thought” full flight without wrapping his feelings in euphemistic metaphor, abstracting idealisations and chastening poetical conceits – an undercurrent which forms a key conflicting drive within the poem as a whole.

The “wavering view of Emilia’s relationship to some Ideal”<sup>78</sup> continues in the litany of epithets which, like the similes of the “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” convey her indescribability through the success of their very failure to do so whilst, as with the circularity of the “Ode to the West Wind” and with the same concomitant duality of precarious evanescence and self-perpetuating energy, the imaged figures are asked to quicken “with unaccustomed glow” (34) the imaged figures. We see this self-

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<sup>77</sup> In doing so the lines may also be somewhat bathetically referencing “her own words” as quoted before the advertisement: compare “The loving soul launches itself outside creation, and creates for itself in the infinite a world all its own, very different from this dark and frightening abyss” (trans. Leader and O’Neill, *SMW*, 796), with lines 13-17 above.

<sup>78</sup> O’Neill, 161.

sustaining yet not fully convincing conceit when “the brightness / Of her divinest presence trembles through / Her limbs” (77-9), in which the “trembles” (78) at once suggests the delicacy of her divinity and hints perhaps at the pressure of such conflation (particularly when compared to the relative ease of the aforementioned similar image in *Alastor*), in much the same way that the assertion of “I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*” (52) smacks of an overly-assertive conclusion ill-supported by the predicates of the preceding lines. In a similar way, “too deep / For the brief fathom-line of thought or sense” (89-90) is suggestive of success and failure in equal measure, which we might say, too, of the effervescent lines which follow, the very “air of glittering improvisation”<sup>79</sup> which gives the lines life also speaking of the lines’ nature as fictive and insubstantial poetic spinning:

The glory of her being, issuing thence,  
 Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade  
 Of unentangled intermixture, made  
 By Love, of light and motion: one intense  
 Diffusion, one serene Omnipresence,  
 Whose flowing outlines mingle in their flowing  
 Around her cheeks and utmost fingers glowing  
 With the unintermitted blood, which there  
 Quivers (as in a fleece of snow-like air  
 The crimson pulse of living morning quiver),  
 Continuously prolonged, and ending never,  
 Till they are lost, and in that Beauty furled  
 Which penetrates and clasps and fills the world;  
 Scarce visible from extreme loveliness.  
 Warm fragrance seems to fall from her light dress,  
 And her loose hair; and where some heavy tress  
 The air of her own speed has disentwined,  
 The sweetness seems to satiate the faint wind;  
 And in the soul a wild odour is felt,  
 Beyond the sense, like fiery dews that melt  
 Into the bosom of a frozen bud.—  
 See where she stands! a mortal shape indued  
 With love and life and light and deity,

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<sup>79</sup> Blunden, *Shelley: A Life Story*, 245.

And motion which may change but cannot die  
(91-114)

These lines sustain a delicate unity of the success and failure of poetic power in such a way that we see them as utterly inseparable. Bloom, employing his mythopoeic distinction (after Buber) between the “I-it” and the “I-thou,”<sup>80</sup> feels that “the thou of Emilia is here successfully realised and apotheosized as being light and motion only”;<sup>81</sup> it would seem more apposite to characterise it as a failed apotheosis but (or rather, *therefore*) a poetic success. In this attempted unifying of two incompatible conceptions of Emilia, we have both “a direct challenge to the limits of poetry” and an enactment of the fact that “the limits necessarily triumph,”<sup>82</sup> and it has its correlative in the poem’s closing section in which another failed unifying takes place: it is at once “one immortality” and “one annihilation” (586-87). Angela Leighton, in attempting to pinpoint why Shelley seemed anathema to Leavis, writes that the language of Shelley’s poetry “generously reaches towards its object, but also fails to grasp it”<sup>83</sup> and that it “acknowledges failure and loss as the ever-present potential of poetry.”<sup>84</sup> We sense this here. The lines read as a poetic making which, topographically allegorized, would accord with the Poet’s journey in *Alastor*, riding on the cusp of their own unsustainability, working “with the force of self-destroying swiftness” (*PU* IV. 249).<sup>85</sup> The “flicker[ing] and cross-flicker[ing] in the space

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<sup>80</sup> See Bloom, 1-10.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>83</sup> Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 89.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>85</sup> Panthea’s words in *Prometheus Unbound* form part of a speech which shares a similar sense of pushing at the limits of poetry.

between a Platonic absolute ... and the particular person”<sup>86</sup> are effervescent failings whose “gestures ... are a measure of [poetry’s] movingly inadequate reach.”<sup>87</sup>

We have, so far in this thesis, engaged with but ultimately rejected the dissolution of Derridean deconstruction and Hogle’s view of Shelley’s poetry as a “rootless passage between different formations,”<sup>88</sup> on the basis of the poems’ own meaningful, aware and vitalising engagement with both possible characterisations. It is in lines such as these that we sense a flirtation with “verbal figures [that are] continually dissolving and thus questioning their structures before any one of them has the chance to seem complete,”<sup>89</sup> an enactment of a “systematic exemption of meaning.”<sup>90</sup> However, there is a paradoxical sense that it is in holding the potential for meaninglessness that Shelley’s work is most meaningful. The spell breaks with “see where she stands!” (112), as the “mortal shape indued / With love and life and light and deity” (112-3) creates the impression of *attempting* to create the impression of an intermingling of the real and the ideal, and conveys its failure to do so, the unusual usage of “deity” (113) interacting with “indued” (112) to feel forced, and in many ways feels almost accidentally metonymic of our response to Emilia in the poem as a whole: a “mortal shape” (112)<sup>91</sup> into which “deity” (113), that is to say, an essence of idealisation, is being incongruously and unsuccessfully poured.

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<sup>86</sup> O’Neill, 165.

<sup>87</sup> Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, 88.

<sup>88</sup> Hogle, 15.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>90</sup> Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 147.

<sup>91</sup> “Shape,” when used by Shelley, seems always to misshape any potential for easy fixity in the words around it: like “form” and “image,” the word-as-noun seems ever to hold the potential of word-as-verb within it, and *vice versa*, and it is rare that we read a line containing any of these words without sensing the ground shifting beneath our feet.

Feeling his failure, the “woe is me” (123) here is repeated in the similar failure of the poem’s final lines (587), and yet in asking “what have I dared?” (124) we see a glimpse of the resolution of this Shelleyan paradox: it is in the very act of daring that Shelley succeeds, in daring in the face not only of failure but in the face of his own doubtful faith in the enterprise.<sup>92</sup> Mark Sandy says of *Alastor* that the poem dramatises “the tension between [a] longing for an absolute and idealised reality and ... persistent encounters with tragic ordinary circumstance.”<sup>93</sup> We see this in *Epipsychidion* and the tension adds much to the poet’s work, yet it operates in a curiously reflexive way: if the “tragic ordinary circumstance” includes, as I think it must, the generative traction of the language’s imperfection, then we have a möbius strip of poetic making in which there is a transmutational interconnectedness between the “persistent encounters” and the “absolute and idealised” such that the distinction between the two is utterly destabilised.

Bloom describes *Epipsychidion* as “exist[ing] to record the struggle of image-making.”<sup>94</sup> He is, I think, correct, though only if we see the “struggle of image-making” in quite a specific way. As we “skat[e]” the “succession of similes”<sup>95</sup> for Emilia only to find each one wanting, and in particular as we skid to a halt with the metaphor of Emilia as herself a metaphor,<sup>96</sup> we fall again against the propensity of

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<sup>92</sup> In the Preface to *Alastor* Shelley, in describing those who do not so dare, implies the potential futility of doing so: those who do not are “deluded by no generous error, instigated by no sacred thirst of doubtful knowledge, duped by no illustrious superstition,” *SMW*, 92-3.

<sup>93</sup> Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Padstow: Ashgate, 2005), xi.

<sup>94</sup> Bloom, 120.

<sup>95</sup> Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime*, 143.

<sup>96</sup> “A Metaphor of Spring and Youth and Morning” (120).



language to deaden, to fix, and in fixing to unravel meaning. The poem gives space for the sense that it is this imperfection in language which prevents us from accessing the ideal, just as in *Alastor* the “search ... for a prototype of [his] conception” is “in vain” in that no representation is sufficient to fully embody that for which the poet is searching. *Epipsychidion*, then, like *Alastor*, records the necessarily imperfect embodiment of an ideal, whether through an allegorical journey or through “that radiant form” (21) of Emilia operating as a “prototype” which is found to be – as she was always destined to be – insupportable of “all that is insupportable” (23).

Yet if much of the “elusive activity peculiar to Shelley’s writing”<sup>97</sup> – much of the meaning-making in Shelley’s poetry – lies in the grapple with the resistance provided by this propensity in language, we are left with a paradox in which linguistic moribundity and fecundity are, as it were, two sides of the same coin. This is worth examining in relation to the notion of the Ideal itself, which by definition must exist in a state devoid of resistance: existing, as it were, in an imaginative space that is “pellucid” and “untrammelled” (to use the terms of C. S. Lewis which I critiqued in the Introduction to this thesis). It is static, fixed, immobile, and thus, paradoxically, in being devoid of vitalising motion, might be considered all image, a Urizenic “solid without fluctuation” whose immutability renders it devoid of life. This is part of the potentially self-defeating “struggle of image-making” of poetic making, part of why the search for a prototype of one’s conception might be in vain: we have seen that Shelley often succeeds in his failing; this is perhaps against a background of the

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<sup>97</sup> Keach, xii.

conceivability of failure lying in succeeding, in which *being* devoid of *becoming* is no being at all.

## V

In the Introduction to this thesis I asked whether Shelley's works enacted a search for a centre in the form of a dimly-perceived nontheistic Absolute or whether it was an enactment of a "centreless displacement of figural counterparts,"<sup>98</sup> and we have noted that in destabilising fixed hierarchical relations there is the danger of replacing one tyranny with another, whether it be the icon of a fixed text or, as in *Alastor*, a "prototype" becoming an icon of a "conception" such that one is mistaken for the other, figural cipher for that which it figures. In *Epipsychidion* and *Alastor*, we have a complex transmutation between the idealised and the actual, the specific and the general. What makes this interaction so complex in these poems is not so much the destabilising of fixed hierarchies I have explored in both Byron and Shelley, but, rather, that such relational hierarchy is potentially philosophically indeterminate from the start: after all, in a relation between a Poet and an "embodi[ment]" of "all of wonderful or wise, or beautiful, which the poet, the philosopher, or the lover could depicture,"<sup>99</sup> or in a relation between an individual love-object and an embodiment of love, which is the cipher, which the representation, which the metaphor, which the image?

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<sup>98</sup> Hogle, 10.

<sup>99</sup> *Alastor*, Preface, *SMW*, 92.

Whatever the merits or otherwise of Leavis's criticisms of Shelley, his description of the poet as possessing a "weak grasp upon the actual"<sup>100</sup> supplies us with a valuable description of the operations of the poet's verse: there is indeed a "weak grasp" at work in Shelley; a controlled looseness of holding. As we sense a simultaneous and intervolved searching for and a reaching towards, an enactment of what Hans-Georg Gadamer might call a "speculative idealism,"<sup>101</sup> we sense too the speculativeness as much as the idealism, feel in the reaching towards an equal holding back, and if we feel his writing often exists "on that verge where words abandon us,"<sup>102</sup> then we might feel too that for Shelley "the verge," the liminal space, the no-place he has cultivated for himself between the calcifying propensities of language and the fixity of idealisation, is the closest we might come in Shelley to a destination. His poetry is an enactment of the provisional, the unfixed, the endlessly becoming. Shelley's qualified poetic making is perhaps equally a qualified unmaking, his artful meditations and his "unpremeditated art" (5)<sup>103</sup> equally a search for an endless mobility at once untrammelled by yet unavoidably connected to what has gone before: like the eponymous cloud which "change[s], but ... cannot die" (76),<sup>104</sup> his creation enacts a simultaneous building and "unbuild[ing] (84)."<sup>105</sup>

It is clear that Shelley's poetry defies easy characterisation: the "vitally metaphorical"<sup>106</sup> work feels too vital to submit to metaphor. We might, however,

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<sup>100</sup> *Revaluation*, 194.

<sup>101</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 1994), 222.

<sup>102</sup> "On Life," *SMW*, 636.

<sup>103</sup> "To A Skylark," *Ibid.*, 463-66.

<sup>104</sup> "The Cloud," *Ibid.*, 461-63.

<sup>105</sup> "I silently laugh at my own cenotaph, / And out of the caverns of rain, / Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb, / I arise, and unbuild it again." (81-4)

<sup>106</sup> O'Neill, 41.

imperfectly co-opt for our imperfect use a symbol with which Shelley seemed particularly taken. Coleridge's memorable co-opted image of "the new Moon / With the old Moon in her arms"<sup>107</sup> reappears in *Alastor* with the "dim and horned moon" which "hung low, and poured / A sea of lustre on the horizon's verge (602-3), operates as simile in *Prometheus Unbound* ("I see a chariot like that thinnest boat / In which the mother of the months is borne / By ebbing light into her western cave" (*PU* IV. 206-09)) and appears again in *The Triumph of Life*:

Like the young Moon

When on the sunlit limits of the night  
Her white shell trembles amid crimson air  
And whilst the sleeping tempest gathers might

Doth, as a herald of its coming, bear  
The ghost of her dead Mother, whose dim form  
Bends in dark ether from her infant's chair.  
(79-85)<sup>108</sup>

I have said that Shelley's lines live in the crucible of their preclusion; that they hold within them what they are not, what they were and what they will be; that elements within Shelley's verse seem to both be and not be other things, such as *Epipsychidion*'s Emilia and her idealisation, the Poet of *Alastor* and his veiled maid, the "shadow of

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<sup>107</sup> The lines, from the *Ballad of Patrick Spence* (author unknown), appear at the beginning of Coleridge's "*Dejection: An Ode*." Coleridge: *Poetical Works*, 362.

<sup>108</sup> The image might also lend itself to Shelley's feelings towards and relationship to his poetic forbears, and indeed perhaps as an imagistic *coda* to Bloom's theories regarding such relationships generally. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), *passim*.

some unseen Power” (1),<sup>109</sup> the “wild West Wind” (1),<sup>110</sup> the external world of nature and the individual self; and I have explored the way in which this sense of otherness, this sense of looking elsewhere, extends to the internal semantic mobility of suggestiveness of individual words. There is something of all of this in the “trembl[ing]” (81) crescent moon, upturned in a liminal space “on the sunlit limits of the night” (80), as a white sliver carrying the darkly-perceived “dead” (84) shadow of the whole moon which both is and is not – and is more than and less than – itself. The Poet of *Alastor*, dying, sees in nature an echo of “his eyes” which “beheld / Their own wan light through the reflected lines / Of his thin hair” (469-71):

his last sight  
 Was the great moon, which o’er the western line  
 Of the wide world her mighty horn suspended,  
 With whose dun beams inwoven darkness seemed  
 To mingle. Now upon the jagged hills  
 It rests, and still as the divided frame  
 Of the vast meteor sunk, the Poet’s blood,  
 That ever beat in mystic sympathy  
 With nature’s ebb and flow, grew feebler still,  
 (645-53)

until “two lessening points of light alone / Gleamed through the darkness” (654-5). This is the space of Shelley’s verse, the “verge” “on the sunlit limits of the night” in which his poetic making operates, at the point of intervolving, between the real and the ideal, the signifier and the signified, individual and nature, external reality and perception, image-maker and made image. The mobile, the transmutational, held

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<sup>109</sup> “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.”

<sup>110</sup> “Ode to the West Wind.”

loosely in a “weak grasp” of precarious becoming, becomes in Shelley more ideal than the Ideal itself, attempt no less achievement than achievement itself, its ephemeral, shifting nature pointing towards a truth which is both voiceless and imageless.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Text and Truth:

#### Text-Making in *Don Juan's* Middle Cantos

##### I

If Shelley's problematized poetic exploration of the consolations and pitfalls of image-making in *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion* offers itself as a corollary to Shelley's ongoing engagement with the processes of poetic expression itself, and if, as this thesis suggests, such an engagement is also present in the work of Byron, it is appropriate to ask whether a concomitant mode of complex separation and otherness is in evidence in Byron's work as he seeks to address his own awareness that poetic expression operates in a space between the unformed and the too-formed. Certainly, there are connections with the depiction of ruin as explored in Chapter Three, as Byron seeks an image which itself operates as a theatre of contention between fixity and flux, product and process, and in Chapter Seven I explore further Byron's use of images of ruin as a half-made, half-unmade state as he seeks to address the particular challenges with which he grapples in the last cantos of *Don Juan*. However, perhaps the most significant vehicle for the expression of the movement between the unformed and the too-formed in Byron is his attention to text-making – something particularly in evidence in the middle cantos of his great epic.

As we have seen, Byron's works can engage in a complex interplay with their own propensity for fixity, systematisation and meaninglessness. In *Don Juan's* middle cantos, this interplay coheres particularly in the poet's exploration of history and its

related, more personal corollaries, posterity and fame. For a poem of such textual mobility, *Don Juan* is a work regularly occupied with the ways in which the mobile sweep of events and the complex ambiguities of personality are transmuted into fixed and fictionalised representations. For Byron, history, posterity and fame are all intimately bound up with questions of articulation, representation, and text-making: with processes of forming. These processes of forming generate attendant questions of verity: of the relationship between that which is represented and its representations.

Byron closes canto VI declaring: “the Muse will take a little touch at warfare” (VI. 120: 960).<sup>1</sup> More than “a little touch,” war becomes the main focus for these middle cantos, to be superseded by a focus on English society from the end of canto X. In my discussion of the opening cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* I mentioned the importance Byron attaches to telling things as they are, in contrast with prevailing misrepresentations; this imperative is heightened, the stakes raised, in relation to warfare (with its aphoristic ‘first casualty’) and in relation to the society Byron and much of his audience knew so well. Chapter Seven will explore the particular means by which Byron seeks to address the challenges inherent in articulation and representation in the English cantos; in this chapter, my concern is with exploring the ways in which Byron draws to the fore a self-conscious attendance to the complexities of text-making in cantos VII to X, and, in the final section of this chapter, with the nature of the challenges he faces as he moves into what came to be the final cantos of his great work.

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical canto, stanza and line numbers in this chapter refer to *Don Juan*, unless stated otherwise.



## II

Three lines into *Don Juan*, Byron mentions the “gazettes” whose “cant” will come to be such cause for opprobrium later in the poem (I. 1: 3); as the first canto draws to a close he muses that “the end of fame” is “but to fill / A certain portion of uncertain paper” (I. 218: 1737-38); and Juan’s note from Julia, its physical particulars described in detail (I. 198: 1577-84), plays significant roles in the first two cantos, its torn sheets eventually facilitating “in silent horror” the unfortunate demise of “Juan’s luckless tutor” (II. 75: 594; 600). Modes of articulation, whether the physical object of the written text, or the narrative formulated according to particular tropes, appear regularly in the poem: from canto VII onwards in particular, forms of recording and relating events are the poem’s subject almost as much as the events themselves. A general shift in focus takes place from the “doing” of “great deeds” to “how shall I relate ‘em” (VII. 81: 646), and to how they are related by others.

The opening of canto IX is a case in point. Ostensibly, the subject is Wellington, yet the stanzas are equally concerned with the fictionalisations inherent in posterity and fame:<sup>2</sup> Wellington functions as exemplar of these fictionalisations as much as the fictionalisations form the basis for Byron’s discussion of Wellington. Only two words of straightforward apostrophe are allowed before parenthetical digression takes over:

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<sup>2</sup> Dale Townshend suggests that “fame, for the young Byron, was ghostly, insofar as it ambivalently evoked in him the sentiments of terror and delight, fear and fascination,” but that “in the poet’s later work, fame is spectral insofar as it is remote, inaccessible and perhaps an entirely phantasmatic construction,” and that such a shift can be tracked across *Don Juan*, “Conjuration and Exorcism: Byron’s Spectral Rhetoric,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 97-130, 110. Certainly, in these middle cantos we see aspect of both characterisations, with a tendency toward the latter, with these lines on Wellington part of an interrogation of fame as a “phantasmatic construction” which, I would suggest, co-opts the poem itself in a self-exploration of its own potential to be no more than just that.

Oh, Wellington! (Or 'Vilainton'—for Fame  
 Sounds the heroic syllables both ways;  
 France could not even conquer your great name,  
 But punned it down to this facetious phrase—  
 Beating or beaten she will laugh the same)—  
 (IX. 1: 1-4)

Immediately, Fame is noted as a construct, and a literary/linguistic one, subject to the proliferation of aural association for which Byron displays a particular genius, simultaneously wringing meaningfulness from the play of signification and emphasising the happenstance of such associations. The canto's opening stanzas retain a focus on the losses involved in the reification of mobile, living action in the calcified and inflexible word, Byron casting light on the false relics of reputation and the fixed artefacts of posterity: on the word as written, as inscribed, or the word *in situ* within a tableau of erroneous transmission. Byron describes Wellington's "shabby" treatment of "Kinnaird ... / In Marinet's affair" as something which "like some other things won't do to tell / Upon your tomb in Westminster's old abbey" (IX. 2: 9-12); he describes "the rest" as "tales being for the tea-hours of some tabby" (IX. 2: 13-14);<sup>3</sup> of the debt the world owes to Wellington after Waterloo, he parenthetically comments that "I wish your bards would sing it rather better" (IX. 3: 24); Wellington is "'the best of cut-throats'" (IX. 4: 25); he is said – with echoes of *Macbeth* – to have "supped full of flattery" (IX. 5: 33); to have "swallow[ed] eulogy much more than satire" (IX. 5: 37); and to be "call'd 'Saviour of the Nations' – not yet saved, / And Europe's Liberator – still enslaved" (IX. 5: 39-40), a line modified in manuscript from "and see

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<sup>3</sup> Arguably Byron is invoking such a tea-hour tale himself here with a reference to Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster, possessing his lines of both the censure of gossip and gossip's attractions.

his statue raised, – & print engraved.”<sup>4</sup> In utilising the apostrophe, Byron is able to subvert a key convention of the device – the proliferation of epithets – in order to prise open the gaps between epithet and man, draw them to our attention and, once open, fill the space with his own indictments of both Wellington and the veracity of posterity. Peter Graham notes that *Don Juan* is “concerned with placing things in contexts, but its characteristic gesture is one of *displacement* by means of *contratexts*.”<sup>5</sup> Part of my interest in these cantos is the extent to which Byron enacts a displacement of history and posterity as themselves a contratext to reality, whilst simultaneously engaging with his own poem’s propensities for verity, falsity, fictionalising and erroneous transmission.

Words upon a tomb; statues; engravings; bards’ imperfect songs; the tea-hour tale; supping; swallowing: Wellington is commodified and consumed; tangible, digestible, and not himself at all. All involve recognition of the distance, of the difference, inherent in text-making. “‘Saviour’” and “‘Liberator’” are immediately subject to pithy reversals which cement the ironising effect of the inverted comma and capitalisation. With “‘the best of cut-throats’,” the inverted commas and the following pre-emptive “do not start; / The phrase is Shakespeare’s” (IX. 4: 25-26) draws attention to the fact that descriptive phrases – and the associations they bring with them – can cohere into discrete signifiers just as individual words can, to be shifted into place and mapped onto a subject they may or may not accurately represent. Jane Stabler, in her valuable exploration of Byron’s use (and non-use) of quotation marks with his literary allusions, suggests that “the marking of ... allusions defamiliarises their content,

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<sup>4</sup> *Don Juan*, ed. T. G. Steffan, E. Steffan and W. W. Pratt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 677.

<sup>5</sup> Graham, 2.

whilst the various degrees of fidelity to the source place all references in a position of dubiety.”<sup>6</sup>

If we recall Shelley’s words from his *Speculation on Metaphysics*, it might be argued that Byron very much *is* doing what Shelley suggests that often “we do not”: Byron in these lines is explicitly “attend[ing] sufficiently to what passes within ourselves,” to the fact that “we combine words, combined a thousand times before,” and that “our whole style of expression and sentiment is inflected with the tritest plagiarisms.”<sup>7</sup> Byron’s poetic making draws attention, when it suits him to do so, to borrowed phrases as stock epithets conjured in recourse to lazy fictionalised representation: all such phrases, Byron suggests, may become easy shorthand, and much is lost in translation. In evoking literary allusion in the description of Wellington and then commenting upon its allusiveness, Byron simultaneously places both the fictionalised conception denoted by the word “Wellington” and his own work in “a position of dubiety.” In this pointing up of language’s shortcomings in relation to the making of meaning, in acknowledging Shelley’s point that “our words are dead, our thoughts are cold and borrowed,”<sup>8</sup> Byron begins to develop what will become a major concern of his final cantos, as well as pointing towards what, in Chapter Six, I will argue is a key concern of Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound*.

When Byron invites Wellington to consider the veracity of the praise heaped upon him – “what *is* your fame? Shall the Muse tune it ye? / Now – that the rabble’s first vain shouts are o’er?” – he impels him to replace one set of representations of posterity for

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<sup>6</sup> Stabler, 70-71.

<sup>7</sup> *Speculations on Metaphysics*, 191.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

another; to “hear it in your famished Country’s cries!” and to listen to the “unflattering Muse” which “deigns to inscribe / Truths that you will not read in the Gazettes” but which “*must* be recited” (XI. 9-10: 69-78). Byron operates as the straightener of the record, drawing a distinction between genuine legacy and false reputation.

In drawing attention to the texts of false representation Byron positions them as false relics, reified and placed alongside other objects with questionable signification. In describing the initial fillip which “some sucking hero” who “turns out to be a butcher in great business” (VII. 83: 660; 663) may afford to recruitment, Byron quickly turns to the listing of “medals, rank, ribands, lace, embroidery, scarlet” and “uniform” (VII. 84: 665; 668) as attractions, according them the status of metonym for heroism and martial success in order that such a status may be called into question: that is to say, they operate as imperfect – indeed false – representations, not to be trusted, like the narratives of the bulletins and gazettes. Similarly, in the next canto, the “win[ning]” of “a ribbon at the breast” is characterised as a matter of chance, with “your rank and file by thousands” being “reward[ed]” instead by “the groan, the roll in dust, the all-white eye / Turned back within its socket” (VIII. 13: 101-04). Interwoven with both of these examples of false representations is a tenacious worrying of the word “glory”: the “crimson varlet” chasing medals and ribbons “deems himself the first in Glory’s van. / But Glory’s Glory; and if you would find / What that is – ask the pig who seeks the wind!” (VII. 84: 670-72); and the winning of the ribbon at the breast is followed by “yet I love Glory: – glory’s a great thing” (VIII. 14. 105). Fame and posterity are denoted in terms which emphasise their nature as capricious, mercurial, ironically ephemeral, and, as a representation of value, false.

Byron sees that such features of fame are also, at least potentially, features of poetry in general and his poem in particular, for better or worse: the falsity of fame and the art of poetic making are, after all, united in *Don Juan* from the very first stanza, in his “want” of “a hero” which is “the true one” in the face of the proliferation of “new one[s]” which, despite the “gazettes” being “cloy[ed] ... with cant,” are not (I. 1: 1-4). Much of Byron’s writing in the middle cantos involves an interrogation not just of text-making in general but of the extent to which poetry, and his poem in particular, may – or may fail to – serve an ameliorative function with regard to such fictionalisations. Thus a looking outward at the world involves a looking inward, and vice versa: the external world as it is perceived and consumed – history, fame, posterity, glory – is intimately bound up with modes of representation, such that subject is process and process subject. One of the things Byron’s work is very much about is Byron’s work.

My intention is not simply to draw out text-making as a particular vein of association, of figuration, in Byron’s work, employed by Byron as a conceit pressed into the service of exploring the various figures and events of his narrative. Rather, I mean to suggest that this ostensible conceit is no less the poem’s subject matter than that which it seems to elucidate. In Chapter Three I explored how the vehicle and tenor of figurative constructions often undergo a hierarchical destabilisation in the opening cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*; here what we have is its more expansive corollary, a mobile and reciprocal interaction between ostensible conceit and ostensible subject. The text tells the story of itself, and of text-making, through the

telling of the story of Juan, Wellington and the rest, just as much as the inverse is true. Michael O'Neill is correct that both Byron and Shelley "negotiate ... between history as a body of past events, and history as the present and future streaming into being";<sup>9</sup> what I am interested in is the operations of an associative symbiosis which might exist between a subject possessing this particular duality and a medium which, for Byron, is reflexively attentive to its own "entropic tendency";<sup>10</sup> its own nature as involved in precisely the same tussle between fixity and flux.

Another way of looking at this is to return to the idea of the opening and closing of gaps. My discussion of Byron thus far has often involved a separation of poetic template from poetic operation: in, for example, the discussion of the Spenserian stanza form as a framework within which Byron's poetic making takes place. Poetic form and what Byron does with that form are clearly less simplistically distinct than such a dichotomising position would suggest, and yet it is, I think, appropriate in the study of Byron because such a separation – a performative engagement with the space of the text *as* a text – is itself a constitutive element in Byron's poetic making. One function of the mechanisms of Byron's writing is to draw attention to its mechanisms; crucially, though, one function of this attention-drawing is to allow us to see that such distinctions are neither neat nor easily held. The gap is opened for our attention, and in its opening we see more clearly the imperfection of the distinction as a mode of apprehending the work, the subtleties of interaction which possess an unfathomable quality which itself is thrown into relief by a baring of the poem's formal operations,

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<sup>9</sup> O'Neill, "The Same Rehearsal of the Past: Byron and the Aesthetics of History and Culture," *Rethinking British History, 1770-1845*, 205-22, 205.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

and thus the gap is closed – or, rather, held simultaneously open and closed. We consequently hold equably a sense of Byron’s work as at once a constructed thing and a thing which is more than its construction: chemistry and alchemy. In its reaching out to a vitalising holism a comparison might be made to our discussion in Chapter One of the way in which the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal, imperfect and piecemeal apprehensions of reality are pointed up in the opening cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in order to highlight not simply our imperfect and elusive partial apprehension of the world but our imperfect and elusive partial apprehension of the fact that our apprehension *is* all these things, and the way in which an engagement with the complexities of this is expressive of a greater, more holistic mobility.

### III

The narrator-figure of canto I, loosely woven into the narrative with references to how he “interfered” in Juan’s family circumstances or how “little Juan o’er [him] threw ... / A pail of housemaid’s water” (I. 24: 185; 191-92), largely gives way to something closer to Byron himself: the gap between poet and poetic voice decreases, as Byron takes greater (though not total, as we shall see) responsibility for his narrative decisions. Juan and his companion are left to the “feminine Caprice” (VI. 119: 952) of Gulbeyaz in order for the poet “to arrange / Another part of History, for the dishes / Of this our banquet we must sometimes change” (VI. 120: 955-56), Byron’s italics clearly addressing current and anticipated critics when he proclaims “such digressions *are* fair” (VI. 120: 959). Byron, as “the present writer of / The present poem” (VII. 3: 17-18), is arbiter of history’s lens within his work, and there is both a self-conscious



attendance to the minutiae of textual representation and an awareness of the potential importance of such minutiae. Byron might let his imperfect recollections from his reading stand unchecked, and might declare that his “Muse despises reference” even to his own works (XIV. 54: 430), but alongside his observation that “renown’s all hit or miss; / There’s Fortune even in fame” (VII. 33: 261-62) there is an understanding that textual representation is where immortality is forged: that there have always, even “living before Agamemnon,” been “brave men” who “have been forgotten” because “they shone not on the poet’s page” (I. 5: 32-36). For all his stated acquiescence in the writer’s caprice and his commitment to “write what’s uppermost, without delay” (XIV. 7: 53), Byron takes his responsibilities seriously, and feels that others should take theirs seriously too.

It is a concern which arises early in his depiction of war. “How shall I spell the name of each Cossacque / Who were immortal, could one tell their story?” he asks, reflecting that although “Achilles’ self was not more grim and gory” it is difficulties of “pronunciation” (VII. 14: 107-12) which may leave them unrecorded. Byron compromises, deciding to “record a few” and leaving out “others of twelve consonants a-piece,” noting that “Fame (capricious strumpet) / It seems, has got an ear as well as trumpet” (VII. 15: 113-20). In reflecting that Fame “cannot tune those discords of narration / ... into rhyme” despite there being “several worth commemoration” (VII. 16: 121-23) he highlights both the imperfection of his own text’s representation and the imperfect representation of all those who record events. In addressing representational imperfection he opens up for our attention the gap between two

notions of history, as “both experiential data and a mode of narrative.”<sup>11</sup> In this respect his concern with history is the same as his concern with poetry: that a process of translation occurs between the object of representation and the representation itself.

This is not to say, however, that we should see Byron’s work as an unambiguous counterblast to such fictionalisation. On the one hand, Byron is happy to expose the hypocrisy of those who reason away their imperfect reportage thus:

‘If’ (says the historian here) ‘I could report  
All that the Russians did upon this day,  
I think that several volumes would fall short,  
And I should still have many things to say;’  
And so he says no more – but pays his court  
To some distinguish’d strangers in that fray;  
(VII. 32: 249-54)

Yet *Don Juan* is often concerned, explicitly and performatively, with the differing, and very often contrary, pulls inherent in the kind of text-making which deals with actual people and events: factual record is ever at the mercy of a conscious or unconscious corralling into the frames of narrative representation, and in his epic this is something which Byron by turns resolutely and successfully resists, reflexively comments upon, accepts as inevitable, and acquiesces to with varying degrees of resignation, sleight-of-hand, or boldness.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 207.

Despite commenting that “history can only take things in the gross” (VIII. 3: 17), he is intermittently keen to eschew the simple representations of reported battle in favour of an acknowledgement of the fog of war:

The night was dark, and the thick mist allowed  
Nought to be seen save the artillery's flame,  
Which arched the horizon like a fiery cloud,  
And in the Danube's waters shone the same—  
A mirrored Hell!

(VIII. 6: 41-45)

War's representations are here complex, unclear, indistinct, operating in contrast to the easy simplifications of bulletin and gazette, as they do on other occasions where the Shelleyan trope of the water-reflected image is used: “the glow / Of burning streets, like moonlight on the water, / Was imaged black in blood, the sea of slaughter” (VIII. 122: 974-76). In emphasising the horrors of war Byron sets it above “thy Plagues, thy Famines,” which “all may yield / To the true portrait of one battle-field” (VIII. 12: 93-96). “True portrait” suggests a distinction between that and false representations whilst simultaneously acknowledging that it still *is* representation.

Byron is keen to show us that he is unafraid of history's lacunae, resisting the temptation to fill the gaps with sensationalistic hearsay: “his own corps, or even the corps, which had / Quite disappeared—the Gods know how! (I can't / Account for every thing which may look bad / In history[)]” (VIII. 31: 243-45). He is both careful not to make assumptions for the sake of narrative and keen to tell us so: writing “among the first, – I will not say the *first*” (VIII. 48: 377), Byron digresses across five stanzas on the importance of getting such details right (VIII. 48-51: 377-408), before

continuing, “But to continue, I say not *the* first, / But of the first, our little friend Don Juan ...” (VIII. 52: 409).

Elsewhere, however, Byron is not beyond recourse to fictionalisations. He chooses to relate a tale he only reveals to be apocryphal part-way through the telling, saying of “a dying Moslem” (VIII. 84: 665) who purportedly bit at his enemy’s heel: “He made the teeth meet, nor relinquish’d it / Even with his life—for (but they lie) ‘tis said / To the live leg still clung the severed head” (VIII. 84: 670-72). Arguably, Byron has it both ways here, allowing the drama of his story to stand before proclaiming the importance of truth in poetry, albeit with a qualifying “unless”:

But then the fact’s a fact—and ‘tis the part  
Of a true poet to escape from fiction  
Whene’er he can; for there is little art  
In leaving verse more free from the restriction  
Of truth than prose, unless to suit the mart  
For what is sometimes called poetic diction ...  
(VIII. 86: 681-86)

This attentiveness to the writer’s capacity to move away from the true representation of events in his creation of the text remains in the stanzas which immediately follow. As Byron approaches relating the discovery of Leila (VIII. 91: 725-28), he is aware that this tale of kindness and hope is rare enough to be in danger of misrepresenting the slaughter were too many stanzas devoted to it, and he therefore devotes two stanzas to justifying its inclusion. His argument is that, as “our human lot” is “chequered” “with good and bad,” then it “would be soporific” if he were “to quote / Too much of one sort”; further, that “as one good action in the midst of crimes / Is ‘quite refreshing’,” it “may serve therefore to bedew these rhymes” which are “A little

scorched at present with the blaze / Of conquest and its consequences, which / Make Epic poesy so rare and rich” (VIII. 89-90: 707-20). Though he claims to “sketch your world exactly as it goes” (VIII. 89: 712), he draws attention to the selection of detail – as opposed to the verisimilitude of the selected detail – as having the potential to misrepresent the whole. Here, it is his own words he is addressing and, it seems, he acknowledges the need for such compromises in the creation of his text. He allows his criticism of others to stand whilst avoiding self-censure by, firstly, suggesting the focus on Leila’s discovery is a nod to the “pretty milk-and-water ways” of “these ambrosial, Pharisaic times” (VIII. 90: 715-16), and also by drawing attention to his text as poetic narrative, which has its own requirements (such as not being “soporific”). Byron has ever been concerned with representing things as they really are, but he is a poet too, and by emphasising that he is servant to two masters he is able to justify the inclusion of Leila’s rescue.

Byron expediently opens up and closes the gaps between prosaic representations and the representations of poetry: he may, for example, choose to describe the *Iliad*’s depiction of the Trojan War as Homer’s “Greek Gazette of that campaign” (VII. 80: 636), but he is aware that the justification of Leila’s inclusion through the poetic imperative is lent greater credence if his work is manifestly different in nature from a versified bulletin or gazette, and it is therefore interesting that he chooses, after the rest of canto Eight has been written, to insert what becomes stanza Eighty-Eight, with its uncharacteristically poeticised, almost Keatsian, tone:

The bayonet pierces and the sabre cleaves,  
 And human lives are lavished every where,  
 As the year closing whirls the scarlet leaves  
 When the stript forest bows to the bleak air,

And groans; and thus the peopled City grieves,  
 Shorn of its best and loveliest, and left bare;  
 But still it falls in vast and awful splinters,  
 As oaks blown down with all their thousand winters.  
 (VIII. 88: 697-704)

Thus the stanza operates performatively to serve as justification for the inclusion of Leila's rescue by emphasising his text's distinctiveness from the gazettes' prosaic listings. Elsewhere he uses the distinction between poem and bulletin to emphasise the impossibility of comprehensiveness: though "fifty thousand heroes, name by name" may be "deserving equally to turn / A couplet, or an elegy to claim," this "would form a lengthy lexicon of glory, / And what is worse still, a much longer story" (VIII. 17: 132-36); consequently, the poet must "therefore ... give the greater number / To the Gazette" (VIII. 18: 137-38). As Anthony Howe notes, in Byron, "narrative's self-knowledge, its acknowledgement of its own selectiveness, becomes a mode of reflecting upon what the poem cannot contain."<sup>12</sup>

By chance, by error, for practical expediency, by conscious design or as a consequence of subjectivity, poetic and historical narratives transmute "experiential data" into something else. As Stabler notes, the poem's "mix of literary, historical and journalistic texts interpolates layers of artifice between narrator, reader and the ostensible objects of the poem."<sup>13</sup> Speaking of the gazettes, Byron writes "thrice happy he whose name had been well spelt / In the dispatch: I knew a man whose loss / Was printed *Grove*, although his name was Grose" (VIII. 18: 42-44); in a note to the lines he emphasises that this anecdote is fact, and that he remembers remarking to a friend:

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<sup>12</sup> Anthony Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Stabler, 137.

“*There is fame! A man is killed, his name is Grose, and they print it Grove.*”<sup>14</sup> Such vicissitudes of writing and accidents of transcription are part of the joy of the interplay of his writing to Byron, but they also operate as metonymic of the gaps between things as they are and things as they are recorded; consequently, the poem expresses an energising ambivalence towards the role of linguistic representation in the exploration of people and events.<sup>15</sup> Acknowledging the existence of these gaps – that is to say, acknowledging that there is a difference between what *is* and what is represented – is important to Byron, as we saw in the importance he attaches to actually bearing witness to places in the opening cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Byron is irked by the notion that one might take the textual representation for the thing itself, yet he is simultaneously aware that the processes of textual representation possess a powerful exploratory capacity.

When Byron “wonder[s] ... if a man’s name in a *bulletin* / May make up for a *bullet* in his body?” (VII. 21: 162-63), he draws our attention to the possibility of the reading public engaging with a fictionalised commodification of war rather than war itself, as if the function of the latter is to provide malleable material for the former: as if “heroes are but made for bards to sing, / ... thus in verse to wage / [Their] wars eternally” (VIII. 14: 109-11). This subject – of, as it were, the bulletin’s tale wagging the dogs of war – is one to which he returns, asking the “Cockneys of London!” and the “Muscadins of Paris!” to “just ponder what a pious pastime war is,” and “think how the joys of reading a *Gazette* / Are purchased by all agonies and crimes” (VIII. 124-

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<sup>14</sup> *BMW*, 647-48.

<sup>15</sup> This is perhaps the most striking example of the fact that, as Dale Townshend notes, “the Byron of *Don Juan* has wholly lost faith in the power of the name to effect a haunting of posterity.” “Conjuration and Exorcism: Byron’s Spectral Rhetoric,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 97-130, 111.

25: 991-94). It is also a subject he emphasises through the use of a device I noted in Chapter One in relation to the Preface to the opening cantos of *Childe Harold*: that of using written texts in analogy to describe the world, such as when he writes “the second column ... [was] now reduced, as is a bulky volume / Into an elegant extract (much less massy) / Of heroism” (VIII. 34: 266-70). However, for all these comments upon the limits of textual veracity, in making his point he utilises the happy (or not so happy) linguistic polyphony of *bulletin/bullet in*, discovered amidst the caprices of linguistic phonology, and in doing so a counter point is made, tacitly and performatively: that the losses of text-making have attendant gains. In Chapter Seven I explore whether such gains are, for Byron, ultimately worth the losses, and to which strategies he takes recourse as a result.

As I suggest in the Introduction, it is not quite right to say that Byron exercises supreme control over language; rather, he exercises supreme control over the *extent* to which he exercises control, understanding the power of judicious relinquishment. There is an employment of a kind of meta-agency which enacts an intermittent ceding of agency: Byron’s relationship to language is always one of harnessing, but he knows when to harness and when to allow himself to be energisingly half-harnessed by. In the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* the poet’s agency is often engaged with a retrograde propensity towards enervation; characteristically in *Don Juan* the poet’s agency is often engaged in an energising tussle with the agency of language itself. This contributes to the invigorating effervescence of the text in that the tussle is between propensities which are each mobile, capricious and unpredictable in the ways in which they make connections. Gavin Hopps suggests that “Byron’s poetry is engendered and distended by an openness to wonder, which is marked by a willingness to write out of



something presently unfolding that he *doesn't* control and *cannot* fathom.”<sup>16</sup> It is precisely this sense of “adventurous openness to the adventitiousness of things”<sup>17</sup> – a quality Hopps identifies with regard to Byron’s response to the places and things he then depicts in language – which at times characterises our sense of Byron’s attitude to the caprices of language itself.

In addition, the relinquishment allows Byron to take his text further beyond the pale of public probity than he otherwise might, with prosody, polyphony and rhyme operating as licensed fool within the drama of his work. Drummond Bone notes, in relation to an instance of slightly strained rhyme (“exception” with “ship soon” (IV, 97: 771-73)), that its effect is to “reinforce[e] the narrator’s control over his material” (appropriate in a stanza in which Byron is disingenuously offering to defer to publishers’ wishes).<sup>18</sup> However, it seems to me that in certain instances of stronger rhyme the intention and effect is precisely the opposite of a reinforcement of control. Implicit in our affective response to the audacities of “bulletin”/“bullet in,” the contentious “cutter”/“butter” rhyme of the shipwreck scene (II, 61: 487-88),<sup>19</sup> the

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<sup>16</sup> *Byron's Ghosts*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> “The Art of *Don Juan*: Byron’s Metrics,” *Byron*, ed. and introd. Jane Stabler (London: Longman, 1998), 204-16, 211.

<sup>19</sup> The couplet – “They grieved for those that perished in the cutter. / And also for the biscuit casks, and butter” – was used to conclude “Remarks on *Don Juan*,” printed in *Blackwood's Magazine* in August 1819 and most likely written by either John Wilson Croker or John Gibson Lockhart. Whilst not without praise, the review describes the work as a “filthy and impious poem” whose “moral strain” was “pitched in the lowest key,” and describes Byron as a “miserable man” who seems “resolved to show us that he is no longer a human being ... but a cool unconcerned fiend” affected by “the demon of his depravity,” *BCH*, 166-73, 167-73. It was a review by which Byron, ever affected by public and critical opinion despite protestations to the contrary, was particularly stung, prompting the writing of his own response, which remained unpublished in his lifetime. In contrast, Hazlitt’s *Conversations of James Northcote, Esq., R.A.* (1830) records James Northcote as singling out the couplet on “the loss of the firkin of butter” as a demonstration of “the master-hand,” adding “a hardened levity to the scene,” an example of what Northcote is said to see as Byron’s exemplary understanding of “the tragi-comedy of poetry,” often “not well managed” by other poets but “in Lord Byron they are brought together just as they are in nature,” *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. xi, 279-80.

same scene's rhyming of "noddy" with "dead body" (II. 82: 655-56),<sup>20</sup> "slaughter" with "soda-water" (II, 180: 1439-40),<sup>21</sup> or any number of other instances, is Byron, hands in air, declaring mock-innocently: *it wasn't me, it was the words*, his "Muse's worst reproof ... a smile" as "she drops a brief and modern curtsy, / And glides away, assured she never hurts ye" (XI. 63: 502-04) – as if his daring lies not in the polished construction of shocking irreverence but in choosing not to polish out the barbs of truth thrown up by language itself.

As a consequence of this, a degree of distance is placed between the irreverent act and the poet, an almost-plausible deniability as he claims "if I sneer sometimes, / It is because I cannot well do less, / And now and then it also suits my rhymes" (XIII. 8: 58-60):<sup>22</sup> the offended are positioned as possessing the humourless puritanism of Malvolio, "tast[ing] with a distempered appetite" (*Twelfth Night*, I, v, 86-87) and mistaking bird-bolts for cannon bullets.<sup>23</sup> The effect created is not so much "that dizzying feeling of the world in the control of patterns we normally assume serve it,"<sup>24</sup> as Bone suggests of the "exception"/"ship soon" rhyme, but a feeling of Byron in the

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<sup>20</sup> In a generally supportive if not unequivocal unsigned *Examiner* review of 31 October 1819, Leigh Hunt cites the couplet as an example of the poem's "heterogeneous mixture," *BCH*, 174-78, 175.

<sup>21</sup> Drummond Bone notes incisively that "this is the 'classic' use of the weak-rhyming couplet – to reduce the importance of an idea by capturing it in a self-consciously artificial context which itself collapses from strength to weakness, and sometimes, as here, to shock us by the possibility of such a reduction. That is, it is morally outrageous to 'reveal' that *slaughter* and *soda water* can be put in the same context, and more profoundly perhaps, what does it signify that we can 'rhyme' on *slaughter* at all?" "The Art of *Don Juan*: Byron's Metrics," *Byron*, ed. Stabler, 210.

<sup>22</sup> After reading cantos III and IV in manuscript, John Wilson Croker, in a letter of 26 March 1820 to John Murray, writes: "I dare swear, if the truth were known, that his digressions and repetitions generate one another, and that the happy jingle of some of his comical rhymes has led him on to episodes of which he never originally thought," *BCH*, 192-95, 192. It is a sense Byron's work cultivates.

<sup>23</sup> "OLIVIA: To be generous, guiltless and of free disposition is to take those things for bird-bolts that you deem cannon bullets. There is no slander in an allowed fool though he do nothing but rail; nor no railing in a known discreet man though he do nothing but reprove" (I. v. 86-92). William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. Keir Elam, The Arden Shakespeare, 3<sup>rd</sup> Revised Edition (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997), 190.

<sup>24</sup> "The Art of *Don Juan*: Byron's Metrics," *Byron*, ed. Stabler, 210.

control of patterns we normally assume serve him but which in fact serve the world, in terms of offering truthful representation.

Many of the elements I have discussed thus far are revisited across a series of several stanzas in canto Nine. The cautionary words towards Wellington are reiterated in “Though hymn’d by every harp, unless within / Your Heart joins Chorus, Fame is but a din” (IX. 34: 271-72), leading to a critical address to “ye great Authors luminous, voluminous! / Ye twice ten hundred thousand daily scribes, / Whose pamphlets, volumes, newspapers, illumine us!” and suggesting that they may be “paid by governments in bribes” (IX. 35: 273-76), which gives way to an exploration of the cycles of long history before Byron checks himself for “deviat[ing] into matters rather dry,” having “quite forg[otten] this poem’s merely quizzical” (IX. 41: 323-24), and so we return to Juan. In truth, though, we had never really left him, nor had we left Byron’s concern with his own writerly verisimilitude, both of which are bound up together as they are bound up with all of the above. In the reflection which immediately precedes the start of this section, Byron writes of how:

Oh ye! Or we! Or he! Or she! reflect,  
That *one* life saved, especially if young  
Or pretty, is a thing to recollect  
Far sweeter than the greenest laurels sprung  
From the manure of human clay, though decked  
With all the praises ever said or sung  
(IX. 34: 265-70)

and as it leads directly into the “hymn’d by every harp” couplet mentioned above, we might see the couplet as having a multivalent operation: it is at once a criticism of

Wellington and of the gazetteers' lionising of acts of slaughter rather than acts of compassion, whilst simultaneously being an interrogation of Byron's poetic practice in his focus on the rescue of Leila amidst the slaughter of battle, which in turn forms part of a wider discussion of such acts themselves as truly ameliorative or penitentiary in the face of wider horrors. He singles out Leila's rescue again in canto Ten, stating that "though my wild Muse varies / Her note, she don't forget the infant girl / Whom he preserved – a pure and living pearl" (X. 51: 406-08). As others have noted, this incident is a subject to which Byron returns in his works and which may connect with the metanarrative of Byron himself.<sup>25</sup> Thus Byron in considering his hero's action is considering his own as both person and poet.

Moving through these associative links returns us to Juan, and we find Byron destabilising his own narrative choices of selection and focus by inviting the reader to "suppose" Juan in various situations and tableau (IX: 42-44: 335-46) – at once literary device and retreat from the selection of device – and to "behold him placed as if upon a pillar" (IX. 44: 351). This line serves the function of highlighting Catherine's capricious adoption of favourites and the instability of their place in the sun, but it also speaks of something more. In many ways Byron's concern with the literary representation of history boils down to this: to whom, and what, is or is not placed upon a pillar for our attention. What we also find in the image are echoes of *Childe*

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<sup>25</sup> After securing the release of a number of Turkish captives from Greece, Byron arranged for them to return home. However, in a letter to Augusta Leigh, Byron writes that one girl, Hato or Hatagèe, "has expressed a strong wish to remain with me, or under my care, and I have nearly determined to adopt her. If I thought that Lady B would let her come to England as a companion to Ada — (they are about the same age), and we could easily provide for her, if not, I can send her to Italy for education," *The Letters of Lord Byron*, ed. R. G. Howarth (London: Everyman, 1962), 379. What is perhaps particularly noteworthy about this is that the letter was written on 23 February 1824, more than a year after Byron wrote the stanzas regarding Leila: on this occasions it seems the unusual multidirectionality of Byron's poetic making finds life mirror art rather than *vice versa*. Byron wrote that "almost all Don Juan is *real* life" (*BLJ*, vol. viii, 186): in this instance real life at least threatens to become *Don Juan*.

*Harold's Pilgrimage's* "here let me sit upon this massy stone" (II. 10: 82), the significance of which I explored at the end of Chapter Three. As Peter Graham notes, *Don Juan* expresses "perpetual tensions between topicality and transcendence,"<sup>26</sup> and in these cantos he explores these conflicting imperatives which, Richard Cronin notes, were present for Byron long before his epic was begun.<sup>27</sup> As the one who points the lens, Byron is conscious of his role as recreator of the past, of history, of the complexities of that relationship with one's subject and of the simultaneously vitalising and calcifying propensities inherent in representation.

#### IV

The movement into the English cantos is characterised by a redoubling of the poet's resolve. Having "prated / Just now enough," Byron closes canto X promising that "by and by I'll prattle, / Like Roland's horn in Roncesvalles' battle" (X. 87: 94-96). The simile is inauspicious – as Byron knew from Walter Scott's *Marmion* and elsewhere, the desperate Roland, belatedly summoning Charlemagne across thirty leagues, reportedly blew so hard that he ruptured his temples and died – and yet it is an apt one. As there is in his correspondence around this time,<sup>28</sup> there is a reckless pugnacity to the poet's lines as he readies himself to wrestle with the mores of English society: a

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<sup>26</sup> Graham, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Cronin offers a neat vignette from 1811 of this divided opinion, citing Francis Jeffrey reviewing Walter Scott and making the case for poetry's eschewal of the concerns of the gazettes, and a reviewer in *The British Critic* who, Cronin notes, "seems so confident that love of country and love of poetry are compatible that he is scarcely prepared to distinguish between them," *The Politics of Romantic Poetry*, 139-40. It is in this particular theatre of contention that Byron had long operated and, in these middle cantos, it becomes a debate into which his great epic wades.

<sup>28</sup> Byron writes to Douglas Kinnaird that "I shall not be deterred by an outcry. They hate me, and I detest them, I mean your present public, but they shall not interrupt the march of my mind, nor prevent me from telling the tyrants who are attempting to trample upon all thought, that their thrones will yet be rocked to their foundation," 2 May 1822. *Lord Byron's Correspondence*, ed. John Murray, 2 vols (London: Murray, 1922), vol. ii, 223.

sense that no holds will be barred and damn the consequences, for his subject and for himself – a determined self- and world-destruction. There is a sense, too, that the earlier cantos were necessary as a prelude to this excursion into the unknown territory of the known.

Poet and hero are not what they were before. We feel it in Juan's journey towards England:

Here he embarked, and with a flowing sail  
Went bounding for the island of the free,  
Towards which the impatient wind blew half a gale:  
High dashed the spray, the bows dipped in the sea,  
And sea-sick passengers turned somewhat pale;  
(X. 64: 505-509)

So far, so canto II. The stanza's turn, however, is striking:

But Juan, seasoned as he well might be  
By former voyages, stood to watch the skiffs  
Which passed, or catch the first glimpse of the cliffs.  
(X. 64: 510-12)

Juan is "seasoned"; the wind is half-tamed, at his back now and urging him on, the sail "flowing"; the "sea-sick passengers" of canto II are conjured, but the analeptic nod serves to denote Juan as other, as inured by experience.

Amongst the many things that Byron's text may be said to be, it is surely a Bildungsroman. The Juan of the early cantos is to a large degree a passive character,

someone to whom things happen; it is in canto VIII that Byron appears to nail Juan's moral colours to the mast in the vignette of Leila's rescue, his primary mark on the world thus far an act of impulsive compassion presumably representative of his nature. Upon arriving in England we are immediately presented with another vignette of impulsive action, but this time it is one in which Juan, "being somewhat choleric and sudden" (XI. 13: 98), kills "poor Tom" (XI. 17: 133). There is a moral counterbalancing, a sense that we should take Juan for all in all, and that he may not act in the ways he has acted before.

Juan's immediate response to England is Byron's too:

Don Juan felt—  
 What even young strangers feel a little strong  
 At the first sight of Albion's chalky belt—  
 A kind of pride that he should be among  
 Those haughty shop-keepers ...  
 (X. 65: 513-18)

The parenthesis seems forced here, as if the poet is justifying, not very convincingly, the transposing of his own relationship with England on to his hero. As with the construction "Juan felt, though not approaching *home*, / As one who, though he were not of the race, / Revered the soil" (X. 81: 645-47), the lines' strength and performative power lie in their very awkwardness: they are precisely as disjunctive as they need to be in order to signal, perfectly imperfectly, the breaking out into a more personal perspective, as Byron speaks more clearly autobiographically of "seven years ... / Of absence" (X. 66: 526-27).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Byron wrote canto X in 1822 and had left England in 1816.

The associative power of physical description is pressed into the service of conveying the shifting state of the poem. In relating how the cliffs “rose, like a white wall along / The blue sea’s border” (X. 65: 513-14), the sea – “Ocean’s plain” (*CHP* II. 90: 848), which promised so much in *Childe Harold* as a place of mobility, liberation and refuge from calcification – is now circumscribed, its limits delineated rather than its freedom defined.

Images of liminality emphasise this sense that we are at a crossroads with regard to what kind of poem, protagonist, and poet is being presented to us, just as Byron goes on to convey England as in a liminal position of “decaying fame” (X. 66: 525). Tom’s death is followed swiftly by Byron pausing to linger over this “rather fine” (XI. 24: 185) image: “The Sun / Had set some time, and night was on the ridge, / Of twilight, as the party crossed the bridge” (XI, 23: 182-84). This spatial and diurnal liminality is followed almost immediately by two striking stanzas which are themselves “rather fine” in the combined audacity and delicacy of their effects, utilising the quotidian image of “the line of lights ... up to Charing Cross” (XI. 26: 201) to conjure the spectre of the French Revolution, mapping onto England’s lamplit streets a discomfiting and subtly destabilising half-held image – itself “a sort of Ignis-fatuus to the mind” (XI. 27: 214), to co-opt a phrase Byron uses in these stanzas – of the streetlamps used as gibbets in a city neither long ago nor far away, as if to highlight the fact that London could easily have been, and could easily be, profoundly different from what it is (XI. 201-16). Momentarily Byron presents us with a fleeting glimpse of a double liminality, London hovering between histories and, like Shakespeare’s Arden, simultaneously England and France.



Byron appears to be preparing us for cantos which will be different from what has gone before, yet what has gone before has its role to play in this: the journeying which qualifies Byron to explore England is poetical as well as physical, and the weathering of this poetic journey also qualifies his readership to receive that exploration. The earlier cantos of *Don Juan* – and, to some significant degree, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in its entirety – form a shared background of association, experience and narrative and poetic tropes which operate as a place both in which and against which the English cantos may occur. Byron is, for example, able to cover ground more quickly by offering in précis that which he has explored at length before, synoptic vignettes which encode more extensive discussions: note the parenthetical “but onward as we roll, / ‘Surgit amari aliquid’” (X. 78: 623-24) near the end of canto X, in which the epigrammatic snatching from Lucretius stands as shorthand for the complexities of the principle of the indivisibility of pain and pleasure: where *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* would devote greater space to the very same passage, here we need no digression on how “full from the fount of Joy's delicious springs / Some bitter o'er the flowers its bubbling venom flings” (*CHP* I. 82: 817-18), the bittersweetness of what is happening “while the bee-mouth sips” (21)<sup>30</sup> neatly swept up into the text as ingredient in our affective response with hardly a pause for breath. Like no other Romantic poet – perhaps like no other poet of any kind – Byron is able to draw on his prior corpus with some assurance regarding its familiarity with his readers.

This associative function of the earlier work operates alongside an equally important dissociative one: where *Don Juan* begins with an expression of dissatisfaction and

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<sup>30</sup> John Keats, “Ode on Melancholy,” *KMW*, 290.

difference – a need for a hero different from the changing heroes of social and historical narrative – as we move into the English cantos it is cantos I to X which serve the function of the narrative object to be superseded, the established order beyond which Byron will move. In this respect, Byron’s earlier work is to Byron as he moves into the English cantos as myth is to Shelley as he begins *Prometheus Unbound*, the relational operations of which I explore in the next chapter. Hazlitt, writing just before Byron’s death, suggests that “he cares little what it is he says, so that he can say it differently from others,”<sup>31</sup> and whilst we might not agree with the first half of the comment, we have seen a repeated desire in Byron to say things differently; in the English cantos, however, we sense that, increasingly, Byron’s earlier works, including much of *Don Juan* itself, has become for him an “other” from which he wishes to distinguish himself. Repeatedly, *Don Juan*’s earlier cantos are described at once as mere prologue to what is to be explored here and as that from which he seeks to depart. As late as the second half of canto XII, Byron chooses to devote a stanza to this point:

But now I will begin my poem.—‘T is  
 Perhaps a little strange, if not quite new,  
 That from the first of Cantos up to this  
 I’ve not begun what we have to go through.  
 These first twelve books are merely flourishes,  
 Preludios, trying just a string or two  
 Upon my lyre, or making the pegs sure;  
 And when so, you shall have the overture.  
(XII. 54: 425-32)

‘T is a little strange indeed, but it is a point he makes again, in what was originally the final stanza of the canto:

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<sup>31</sup> William Hazlitt, “Lord Byron,” *The Spirit of the Age*, 1825, *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. xi, 69-78, 70.

Here the twelfth Canto of our introduction  
 Ends. When the body of the book's begun,  
 You'll find it of a different construction  
 From what some people say 'twill be when done:  
 The plan at present's simply in concoction.  
 (XII. 87: 689-93)

From the end of canto X onwards, we are told that the poem from this point on is going to be different from what has come before: things are changing, moving from one state to another. As Juan is changed, so is Byron, and there is a repeated statement of intent. It is said of Juan, surveying London on Shooter's Hill:

He paused—and so will I; as doth a crew  
 Before they give their broadside. By and bye,  
 My gentle countrymen, we will renew  
 Our old acquaintance; and at least I'll try  
 To tell you truths *you* will not take as true,  
 Because they are so.  
 (X. 84: 665-70)

The “broadside” mentioned in the simile is a singularly appropriate phrase for what seems to be planned here: Byron, in an example of what Susan Wolfson calls “linguistic cross-dressing,” an “exchange of the properties of gender” in *Don Juan*,<sup>32</sup> characterises himself as a “male Mrs Fry,”<sup>33</sup> who will “with a soft besom ... sweep your halls, / And brush a web or two from off your walls” (X. 84: 670-72). Byron appears to wish to position the reader as seeing these final stanzas of canto X as a

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<sup>32</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, “‘Their She Condition’: Cross-dressing and the Politics of Gender in *Don Juan*,” *English Literary History*, 54 (1987): 598-612 (591).

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Fry, the Quaker prison reformer.

divesting, a shedding of a layer of constructedness as the poet makes it known that this is personal; that this is important to him. Canto XI ends with the poet proclaiming that, though he “may stand alone,” he “would not change [his] free thoughts for a throne” (XI. 90: 720), having advised us to “ne’er doubt / *This* – when I speak, I *don’t hint*, but *speak out*” (XI. 88: 703-04).

Canto XII begins with an address to “good People all, of every degree” that “in this twelfth Canto ‘tis my wish to be / As serious as if I had for inditers / Malthus and Wilberforce” (XII. 20: 153-57), before beginning the next stanza by reiterating “I’m serious” (XII. 21: 161). He states that “now / [He] mean[s] to show things really as they are, / Not as they ought to be” (XII. 40: 313-15), and the next canto’s first words are, “I now mean to be serious” (XIII. 1: 1). As canto XIV comes to a close he states that he “shall take a much more serious air / Than [he] ha[s] yet done, in this Epic Satire” (XIV. 99:789-90), having earlier in the canto proclaimed his muse to be one which “gathers a repertory of facts” and “by no means deals in fiction” (XIV. 13: 97-98).

As late as canto XVI Byron proclaims his muse to be “of all the Muses that [he] recollect[s]” (XVI. 2: 13), “the most sincere that ever dealt in fiction” (XVI. 2: 16), about to proclaim “the most / True” truth “of all truths which she has told” (XVI. 4: 25-26). He writes that “adversity is the first path to truth,” and in Juan we have a character who has “proved war, storm, or woman’s rage” (XII. 50: 397-98), a protagonist seemingly fit for the exploration of the truths Byron is readying himself to tell. Jane Stabler notes of canto XII that it “is punctuated with digressions which signal

a reinvigorated authorial independence and an awareness of new beginnings.”<sup>34</sup> What we have in front of us, it seems, is an unflinching satirical deconstruction of English society executed by a seasoned poet manoeuvring his seasoned protagonist through a world ripe for dissection.

## V

Amidst the proclamations of fresh starts and redoubled resolve, what we actually find in these cantos is something much less straightforward, much more ambiguous in its operations, the forthright going hand in hand with the tentative, the declarative with the ambivalent, the repeated avowals representative of an imperfect striving to attain what remains just out of reach. The poet’s writing becomes increasingly an articulation of his difficulties in conveying this particular time and place. Naturally, as ever with Byron, we are left unsure whether a tonal shift is a divesting of constructedness or simply (or complexly, for that matter) a costume change – yet however we wish to interpret this change, there is a display of vulnerability and concern more reminiscent of the Byron of the early cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* than the writer of the preceding cantos of *Don Juan*. More and more, Byron’s necessarily imperfect poetic making comes to be about the imperfection of poetic making.

We get the distinct sense that Byron is struggling – that the mores of English society and the iniquities of English figures, so deftly evoked, scrutinised and deflated in asides, digressions and analogies throughout the preceding cantos,<sup>35</sup> may be more

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<sup>34</sup> Stabler, 186.

<sup>35</sup> As Peter Graham notes, “*Don Juan* is in England long before Don Juan is,” Graham, 157.

easily approached in this oblique way, and when facing them head-on they prove difficult to write about:

What with a small diversity of climate,  
Of hot or cold, mercurial or sedate,  
I could send forth my mandate like a primate  
Upon the rest of Europe's social state;  
But thou art the most difficult to rhyme at,  
Great Britain, which the Muse may penetrate.  
All countries have their 'Lions,' but in thee  
There is but one superb menagerie.  
(XII. 24: 185-92)

As I have noted before – and indeed as Byron himself has noted before, standing before St. Peter's in canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – in the depiction of a scene of multiple detail, what Byron often offers us is a “piecemeal ... / ... contemplation” of “the great whole” (*CHP* IV. 157: 1405-06), a series of vignettes whose multiplicity is denoted by accrual and number, sometimes accompanied by a statement that these elements “mix'd conspicuous” (*CHP* II. 59: 523), rather than by evocative description of the actual intermingling. Where Shelley's work often places the operations of intermingling itself to the fore, Byron gives us constituent elements but often falls short of conveying the interactive mobility of the overall impression or the scene in its totality.

In the English cantos, Byron's peremptory and determined proclamations of regained focus are often immediately followed by a need to make the particular point that a superficial experience of England is not sufficient: early in canto XI a cry of “To our Theme” is immediately followed by, “the man who has stood on the Acropolis, / And looked down over Attica; or he / Who has sailed where picturesque Constantinople

is..." – and so on – "May not think much of London's first appearance – / But ask him what he thinks a year hence" (XII. 7: 49-56). Similarly, in canto XII, the decisive "and now to business" gives way immediately to "Oh my gentle Juan, / Thou art in London," and whilst "'Tis true that thy career is not a new one" and "thou art no novice in the headlong chase / Of early life," nevertheless "this is a new land / Which foreigners can never understand" (XII. 23: 177-184). The challenge Byron has set himself appears to weigh increasingly heavily on him as the cantos progress. Saying something new in a new way becomes more difficult when the previous ten cantos, having sought to do just that, are now their own corpus of tropes and modes: the poem which has thus far sought to take a new stance on what has gone before finds that the poem now *is* what has gone before. Faced with a combination of a subject to which he particularly wishes to do justice, the anxiety of his own influence upon himself, and his own misgivings with regard to articulation and representation generally, Byron emerges in these cantos, and in cantos XV and XVI in particular, as a poet searching for and employing audacious means to find an increasingly elusive sense of meaning. The maintaining of his work's vital instability is challenged from multiple directions, his own corpus a point of stasis from which he wishes to enact movement in order to represent a subject which poses particular challenges in relation to language's deleterious potential towards fixity.

Byron wants to get this right, and is aware that he is falling short. Whilst the focus on more familiar themes makes these cantos more quotidian in nature than his depictions of war, we sense operating in concert with the social critique a reaching for a representative profundity, and as so often in Byron a bathetic undermining and an elevating pathos go hand in hand. Byron seems intent on showing us what a piece of

work is man in these cantos, and whilst this involves exposing the underbelly beneath the respectability, the manoeuvrings and the dance of etiquette in “good society,” which is, Byron proclaims, “but a game” (XII. 58: 459), it involves, too, an elevating allegorising of the “microcosm on stilts” (XII. 56: 441) he lays before us. There is an ambitious comprehensiveness reached for in Byron’s depictions of the various social circles, a comprehension at once of infinity and finitude in the human condition; a reaching for a representative profundity in what he is attempting to do, a sense of the biblical, the fabular, or the morality tale, Byronic ironising notwithstanding. His first arrival in England is characterised by a heady revelling in the familiar – “bold Britons, we are now on Shooter’s Hill!” (X. 80: 640) – but this familiarity with his subject matter, and the “mixed regret and veneration / For its decaying fame and former worth” (X. 66: 524-25) which such familiarity engenders, seems to raise the stakes with regard to doing it justice and leave him disconcerted by his perceived inability to do so, and his perceived inability to draw broader points from the individual details.

Byron’s depiction of English society is characterised by an attempt to record what he finds but also to lament what has been lost, and as such has, for all its focus on his home country, something in common with the depictions of fallen classical civilisation in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Here, though, we have a world still in existence, teeming with activity and motion and change, and yet simultaneously curiously enervated and stagnant. It is a paradox Byron appears to find difficult to fathom. His descriptions include images of blending and dissolution, a revelling in the language of ephemerality and mobility which we have seen elsewhere in his work – he suggests, for example, that one:



Must steer with care through all that glittering sea  
 Of gems and plumes and pearls and silks, to where  
 He deems it is his proper place to be;  
 Dissolving in the waltz to some soft air,  
 Or prouder prancing with mercurial skill.  
 Where Science marshals forth her own quadrille.  
 (XI. 70: 555-60)

Yet the “life of a young noble” (XI. 74: 592) he depicts is one which transmutes the vitality of this potential effervescence into something moribund, full of contradictions which render them somehow separate from a lived life: “they are young, but know not youth,” they are “handsome but wasted, rich without a sou; / Their vigour in a thousand arms is dissipated,” and so on, until “having voted, dined, drunk, gamed, and whored, / The family vault receives another lord” (XII. 75: 593-600). Here mobility and change manage to embody both stagnation and loss. He laments:

Alas!  
 Where is the world of *eight* years past? ‘*Twas there—*  
 I look for it—‘tis gone, a Globe of Glass!  
 Cracked, shivered, vanished, scarcely gazed on, ere  
 A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.  
 Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,  
 And dandies, all are gone on the wind’s wings.  
 (XI. 76: 601-608)

“Glittering,” used twice in a handful of stanzas, does not imbue vitality in the way it did in *Childe Harold*. What follows is an extended lament for what has gone, across several stanzas in an unanswered roll-call, asking “where is” more than a score of figures: Napoleon, Castlereagh, Grattan, Curran, Sheridan, Brummell, Whitbread, Romilly; and on (XI. 77-80: 609-33). Sandwiched between this litany of loss and a

three-stanza Prufrockesque listing of all that “I have seen” (XI. 83-85: 657-80) is an admission that:

In short, the list of alterations bothers:  
There’s little strange in this, but something strange is  
The unusual quickness of these common changes.

Talk not of seventy years as age! in seven  
I have seen more changes, down from monarchs to  
The humblest individual under heaven,  
Than might suffice a moderate century through.  
I knew that nought was lasting, but now even  
Change grows too changeable, without being new:  
Nought’s permanent among the human race,  
Except the Whigs *not* getting into place.  
(XI. 81-82: 646-56)

The bathetic note of the final line and the pugnacious resolution of the handful of stanzas which proceed to bring the canto to a close fail to erase entirely the poignancy of these lines. There has been much discussion of M. H. Abram’s decision to exclude Byron from his *Natural Supernaturalism* on the grounds that the poet “in his greatest work ... speaks with an ironic counter-voice and deliberately opens a satirical perspective on the vatic stance of his Romantic contemporaries,”<sup>36</sup> but whether we agree or not with the characterisation it seems to me that we should acknowledge the intermittent presence of a subtilized counter-counter-voice which at once “preserv[es] [the] distance”<sup>37</sup> of that opened perspective whilst gesturing towards if not entirely committing to a closing of that satirical perspective. It is, paradoxically, in the poet’s not-quite-convincing assertion of control that we gain all the more powerfully “a sense

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<sup>36</sup> *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1971), 13.

<sup>37</sup> I refer here to John Lennard’s characterisation – as mentioned in the Introduction – of irony as involving a “preservation of distance.” *The Poetry Handbook*, xxv.

of the irruptive disturbance of unmastered moments,”<sup>38</sup> as Gavin Hopps describes the “openness to wonder” discussed above.

“Bothers” is precisely the right verb: this is not the all-consuming melancholic lament of *Childe Harold*; rather, it is the aforementioned “mix’d regret and veneration / For its decaying fame and former worth,” an acknowledgement that the society he depicts is one which is going through the motions – the motion, the mobility – of what it once was, but something has been lost. It is perhaps hardly surprising that canto XII begins with a lamentation on the losses associated with his own liminal position between youth and age; nor is it surprising that his chosen analogy in this lamentation is history itself, arguing that “of all the barbarous Middle Ages, that / Which is the most barbarous is the middle age / Of man” (XII. 1: 1-3) and describing it as an “epoch” (XII. 2: 12).

Increasingly, after the resolve and the sense of effort redoubled with which he enters into these cantos, Byron begins to comment upon the difficulties he is having in writing about English society, which, for all its glittering, seems a “field so sterile” (XI. 64: 507), devoid of the substance, the vitality, which he has found elsewhere. After the lament upon the stagnant change of English society at the end of canto XI, the explication of these difficulties progresses in a particular way. At first it presents itself by proxy, through Juan, who, as one:

... coming young from lands and scenes romantic,  
Where lives not law-suits must be risked for Passion,  
And Passion’s self must have a spice of frantic,  
Into a country where ‘tis half a fashion,

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<sup>38</sup> *Byron’s Ghosts*, 16.

finds that it “seemed to him half commercial, half pedantic” (XII. 68: 541), the poet’s voice keen to preface this sentiment with an ameliorative “and no sneer against the shore / Of white cliffs, white necks, blue eyes, bluer stockings, / Tithes, taxes, duns, and doors with double knockings” (XII. 67: 534-36) and follow it with “howe’er he might esteem this moral nation” (XII. 68: 542).

By the end of canto XIII, the shift is from Juan to the poet, who criticises English society’s homogenous lifelessness: after describing “good company” as “a chess-board” (XIII. 89: 705) and listing what “seem a heterogeneous mass” (XIII. 94: 745), he makes the point that, now, “society is smooth’d to that excess / That manners hardly differ more than dress” (XIII. 94: 751-52), and “society is now one polish’d horde, / Form’d of two mighty tribes, the *Bores* and *Bored*” (XIII. 95: 759-60). Imagery, such as water, previously used, however equivocally, primarily to accord vitality and motion, is employed again and found wanting: the countesses “pass like water filtered in a tank, / All purged and pious from their native clouds” (XIII. 80: 635-36). Under such circumstances, Byron suggests, though we may be “gleaners, gleanings / The ... ears of truth,” those ears are “scanty but right-well thrashed” (XIII. 96: 761-62), and we live in a “vile age / Of chaff” (XIII. 97: 769-70). In such an age, he finds that “all was gentle and aristocratic / In this our party; polish’d, smooth, and cold, / As Phidian forms cut out of marble Attic,” and “we have no accomplish’d blackguards, like Tom Jones, / But gentlemen in stays, as stiff as stones” (XIII. 110: 873-80).

Canto XIV begins in reflective mood, with contemplations of mortality and even ruminations on suicide giving way to an interrogation of his own changing drives, admitting that “in youth I wrote because my mind was full, / And now because I feel it growing dull” (XIV. 10: 79-80); he asks rhetorically of himself, “but ‘why then publish?’” (XIV. 11: 81) answering, “to make some hour less dreary” (XIV. 11: 84). This, and what follows, feels like self-rebuttal in the face of uncertainty, and he co-opts his own self-doubt as a creative aid, arguing:

I think that were I *certain* of success,  
I hardly could compose another line:  
So long I’ve battled either more or less,  
That no defeat can drive me from the Nine.  
(XIV. 12: 89-92)

He insists that “this feeling ‘tis not easy to express, / And yet ‘tis not affected, I opine” (XIV. 12: 93-94), before explaining the essential difficulty of conveying this particular “portion of the world”: that “there is a sameness in its gems and ermine, / A dull and family likeness through all ages, / Of no great promise for poetic pages” (XIV. 15: 113-20):

With much to excite, there's little to exalt;  
Nothing that speaks to all men and all times;  
A sort of varnish over every fault;  
A kind of common-place, even in their crimes:  
Factitious passions, wit without much salt,  
A want of that true nature which sublimizes  
Whate'er it shows with truth; a smooth monotony  
Of character, in those at least who have got any.

Sometimes, indeed, like soldiers off parade,  
They break their ranks and gladly leave the drill;  
But then the roll-call draws them back afraid,  
And they must be or seem what they were: still

Doubtless it is a brilliant masquerade;  
But when of the first sight you have had your fill,  
It palls—at least it did so upon me,  
This Paradise of Pleasure and *Ennui*.  
(XIV. 16-17: 121-36)

The ennui he mentions is, he states earlier, “a growth of English root” (XIII. 101: 805). Byron’s contention is that, ultimately, in English society “there’s little left but to be bored or bore” (XIV. 18: 142), and for writers, fundamentally “there’s little to describe” (XIV. 20: 160): this is, for him, “the reason why” “there’s no description recent” (XIV. 15: 115) of such a world; the reason why “’Tis said—indeed a general complaint— / That no one has succeeded in describing / The *Monde*, exactly as they ought to paint” (XIV. 19: 145-47); and one of the reasons why Byron feels he “could much more easily sketch a harem, / A battle, wreck, or history of the heart, / Than these things” (XIV. 21: 163-65). The other reason, he admits, is that he “wish[es] to spare ‘em / For reasons [he] choose[s] to keep apart” (XIV. 21: 165-66); that “vulgar people must not share it” (XIV. 21: 168), and that, besides, the “mystic diapasons” of his “music” mean that “there is much which could not be appreciated / In any manner by the uninitiated” (XIV. 22: 174-76). Consequently, he writes:

And therefore what I throw off is ideal—  
Lower'd, leaven'd, like a history of Freemasons;  
Which bears the same relation to the real,  
As Captain Parry's voyage may do to Jason's.  
(XIV. 22: 169-72)

In previous chapters I have noted the importance Byron attaches to accurate representation and the distinction he seeks to draw between himself and poets who

present something fictionalised: something, in fact, “ideal,” “lower’d” and “leaven’d.” To admit to the possibility that his writing (like all writing, Byron would most likely contend) stops short of accurate representation is one thing – indeed, his exploration of the difficulties inherent in representation is testament to the importance he attaches to it – here, though, the language is more that of acceptance: what seems to be gone is the *striving*.

Byron rallies, more than once. He does so briefly seven stanzas later, stating that though the “dull and dreary” weather is “more difficult to rhyme at” (XIV. 29: 231; 228) and “an indoor life is less poetical,” “be it as it may, a bard must meet / All difficulties, whether great or small, / To spoil his undertaking or complete” (XIV. 30: 233-38). In the next canto a sequence of three stanzas firstly explains the difficulties inherent in all writing (“the difficulty lies in colouring / ... With Nature manners which are artificial, / And rend’ring general that which is especial” (XV. 25: 198-200)), then distinguishes the *particular* difficulties of his present task:

The difference is, that in the days of old  
Men made the manners; manners now make men—  
...  
Now this at all events must render cold  
Your writers, who must either draw again  
Days better drawn before, or else assume  
The present, with their common-place costume  
(XV. 26: 201-208)

and finally proclaims that nevertheless, “We’ll do our best to make the best on’t:—  
March! / March, my Muse! If you cannot fly, yet flutter; / And when you may not be  
sublime, be arch” (XV. 27: 209-11).

These rallying cries against the difficulties of poetic representation function in their proliferation in the same manner as both the repeated statements of determination to be different in these cantos and the repeated proclamations that now, *now* the text will really begin: they exacerbate rather than ameliorate the sense that Byron’s exploration of English society has not played out and will not play out in the way he would wish. As I noted in Chapter One, the quotation from Horace which serves as epigram to *Don Juan* speaks of the difficulties of treating in your own way what is common,<sup>39</sup> and on the Lovelace manuscript of *Hints from Horace* Byron expands this by scribbling: “Whate’er the critic says or poet sings / ‘Tis no slight task to write on common things.”<sup>40</sup> As Chapter Seven explores, the story of the English cantos becomes increasingly the story of Byron’s attempts to address these challenges.

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<sup>39</sup> “*Difficile est proprie communia dicere.*” *BMW*, 373.

<sup>40</sup> *Don Juan*, Steffan, Steffan and Pratt, 562.



## CHAPTER SIX

### “On A Poet’s Lips”:

#### Relation and Articulation in *Prometheus Unbound*

##### I

It is clear that Byron and Shelley in their differing ways show an unusual level of engagement with processes of relation and processes of articulation. The previous chapter explored how Byron’s closing and opening of gaps, first explored in Chapter One in relation to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, manifests itself in an attention to text-making in *Don Juan*; the next will show how this gives rise to a poetic making which seeks recourse to the unarticulated and unformed as means of somewhat uneasy poetic articulation and formation. Chapter Two has explored the mobile interrelations at work in the Shelleyan lyric as it enacts a holding of unstable meaning, and in Chapter Four the argument exhibited the ways in which Shelley’s engagement with image-making serves as vehicle for an exploration of the risky and potentially self-defeating business of evocation itself.

Byron’s text-making; Shelley’s image-making. In each case processes of representation, relation and articulation are pressed into the service of an interrogation of processes of representation, relation and articulation; in each case those processes’ limitations as much as their opportunities are made apparent. Often, the poetry’s capacity to engage, affect and evoke lies in their engagement with these limitations and opportunities alike. In the poems studied so far, what has held those limitations at bay or co-opted them for the poet’s use is instability itself: mobilities sportively wrestling with the static and meaningless. Yet whilst this tussle underlies much of the

poets' writing much of the time, each poet at times has to engage more explicitly with the possibility that mobility of complex interrelation and the poet's own genius for articulation may not be enough to fulfil their desires as poets. As the second half of the previous chapter argued and as Chapter Seven will show, it is in *Don Juan's* English cantos that this is most powerfully and affectingly played out for Byron. For Shelley, it is in *Prometheus Unbound*.

While the complexities of relation are an important aspect of Shelley's oeuvre, in *Prometheus Unbound* what is more clearly and regularly pointed up and simultaneously subtilized in the text's complex relation with relation itself. I mean to suggest by this not only that this is a valuable way to characterise the poetic operations of the lyrical drama and a valuable prism through which to explore those operations, but that the relation with relation is, ultimately, the work's great subject, catalyst, conflict and theme. The lyrical drama is at its most compelling when it operates in the interstices between relation and non-relation, and in the interstices of metarelation. By the former, I mean the ways in which Shelley's poem tests the possibilities and limits of poetry as an originating force and vehicle "unbound" from what has gone before, a testing which necessitates a paradoxical engagement with the possibilities and constraints, consolations and pitfalls, of influence and response. By the interstices of metarelation I mean when the more explicit narrative and thematic explorations of the complexities of relation, influence, origin, supercession and revolution engage with and are engaged by the formal and stylistic subtleties of Shelley's writing. Alongside this attendance to relation lies an attendance to the problematic nature of utterance itself. In an interrogation of the nature of motion and change, of the relation between the two, and of a tenacious concern with articulation and, particularly, non-

articulation, Shelley's audacious work and Byron's English cantos function as two differing responses to such imperatives.

Both parts of the poem's title signal this engagement with relation. Its status as a "lyrical drama" positions the text simultaneously within the traditions of form and in the boundary-space between forms. It also suggests an attention to the performative in the page-bound and a qualified giving-over to the imagination as the "theatre of contention between mighty factions" within the work – both in that, as a closet drama, it is the imagination rather than the stage which forms the space in which the mighty factions of the narrative contend, and also because the operations of the imagination, its imaginings and its shifting levels of self-awareness are themselves factions in internal contention within the space of the poem. In adopting the title of the middle drama of Aeschylus' *Prometheia*, Shelley simultaneously positions his text within a literary heritage and stakes his claim to branch away from that heritage.<sup>1</sup> What moves this decision from the relational to the metarelational is the nature of both title and text, whose concerns are with being "unbound": from the title onwards, what happens in the poem and the happening of the poem are bound in this shared exploration.

Interrogation of the value of relation continues in the choice of epigraphic quotation and in the poem's Preface.<sup>2</sup> The line from Aeschylus's lost *Epigoni* – "*Audisne haec, Amphiarea, sub terram abdite?*"<sup>3</sup> – adheres narratively and tonally to Prometheus' initial defiant calls to his tormentor as well as being suggestive of Shelley's Preface in

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<sup>1</sup> Scholarship since the composition of Shelley's poem suggests that we cannot ascribe the authorship of the *Prometheia* to Aeschylus with absolute certainty, nor can we state unequivocally that the eleven fragments constituting the Hellenic *Prometheus Unbound* form part of a trilogy by a single author. Shelley, however, would have believed both to be the case.

<sup>2</sup> *SMW*, pp. 229-32.

<sup>3</sup> "Do you hear this, Amphiaraus, in your home under the earth?" *SMW*, p. 229.

his call to the poet's own detractors and forbears. The fact that Shelley in a notebook quotes the line below the words "To the Ghost of Aeschylus"<sup>4</sup> may be interpreted as at once dedicatory invocation and, as it is more commonly viewed, pugnacious challenge: like an invocation to Old Hamlet in the cellage, Shelley exhibits a simultaneous responsibility to, and desire to assert his freedom from responsibility to, what has gone before.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the beginning of the Preface announces adherence to and rejection of precedent:

The Greek tragic writers, in selecting as their subject any portion of their national history or mythology, employed in their treatment of it a certain arbitrary discretion. They by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation or to imitate in story as in title their rivals and predecessors. ...

I have presumed to employ a similar license.<sup>6</sup>

The ironies in Shelley's approach are clear. His argument is that he is adopting the approach of the Greek tragic writers in not adopting their approach, and he calls on their example as justification for not calling on their example. What may give the reader little pause in the Preface beyond an acknowledgement of gentle irony is writ large in the unfolding of the lyrical drama itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Bodleian Shelley Manuscript 15.

<sup>5</sup> Though I would quibble with the stridency of Jerrold Hogle's view that "the placement of the addressee [of the epigraph] "under the earth" ... clearly locates the lyrical drama's principal literary ancestor in the Great Memory," Hogle is correct in his observation that the epigraph "reveals the living writer and his text as pulled, the way Shelley's Prometheus is pulled, in two directions at once." Hogle, 372.

<sup>6</sup> *SMW*, 229-30.

Stuart Sperry notes that Shelley's Preface "forbids any easy summary";<sup>7</sup> Christine Gallant that in the face of its pluralities the various "well-defined positions" of "most critical readings" "take their starting-points from different sentences" within it.<sup>8</sup> In terms of the range of subjects touched upon and the heresy in paraphrasing the closing ruminations on art, poetry and the lyrical drama's purpose, both are correct; yet what unites its disparate elements is a meditation on the nature of relation and influence, approached in a number of conflicting ways. Shelley moves somewhat fitfully between his poem's relation to "the *Prometheus Unbound* of Aeschylus," the relational focus of his primary objection to Aeschylus' narrative ("the reconciliation of Jupiter with his victim"), the specific relations which form the basis of the poem's imagery ("in many instances ... drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed"), the relation between this approach and the approaches of contemporaries ("this is unusual in modern poetry") and forbears ("Dante and Shakespeare are full of instances of this kind ... but the Greek poets ... were in habitual use of this power"),<sup>9</sup> the relation between contemporary writers and Shelley himself, between the poet and nature, and between form and spirit within the process of poetic composition. Even before the scene is literally set, the scene is set for an exploration within the poem of the complexities of relation.

When the scene *is* literally set, it is telling in its focus on relation and its operation as a mobile counterpoint to the poem's attitude to the static. The opening stage directions are innovative in both their spatial and temporal depictions, and the innovation lies in

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<sup>7</sup> Sperry, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Christina Gallant, *Shelley's Ambivalence* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 72.

<sup>9</sup> *SMW*, 230.

Shelley carefully locating these directions in a middle ground between derivation and innovation itself. By opening the drama in a caucasus Shelley signals its connection to the traditional setting of the Georgian mountains; simultaneously, he signals a departure from that tradition by shifting the location to the caucasus indicus. In doing so, as the Longman Shelley notes, Shelley is “placing his action in a region traditionally associated with the birth of civilisation, and away from an area tainted by the presence of reactionary political forces in S[helley’s] contemporary milieu,”<sup>10</sup> and yet we should recognise that he is doing so in a way which allows the signal of relation to what has gone before to remain. Bloom is correct in stating that “the ‘Ravine of Icy Rocks’ is Shelley’s visualization, and should recall to us the 1816 vision of the ravine of Arve in ‘Mont Blanc’.”<sup>11</sup> It is also worth noting – as, despite its title, we should also note with regard to the earlier poem – that by evoking a “Ravine” the description gives at least equal weight to absence – to negative space – than to what is present. It is an observation of significance not only to the concerns of this chapter but to the exploration of Byron’s English cantos in the next.

Most significant within these stage directions, however, is that “during the Scene, morning slowly breaks” (I. s.d.).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the statement is surely among the most significant of the first act, in two ways. Firstly, in imbuing change it signals the affirmative direction of temporality and therefore offers affirmation of the inevitable end-point of Prometheus’ “endur[ance]” (I. 406). Secondly, this representation is visual (or, as a closet drama, psychovisual), unarticulated by the *dramatis personae*

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<sup>10</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, eds. Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), vol. ii, 477.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, 91.

<sup>12</sup> Parenthetical act, scene (where relevant) and line numbers in this chapter refer to *Prometheus Unbound*, unless stated otherwise.

within the action, and as such is an early instance of a giving-over to the powerfully unsaid, or imperfectly-said, within the work. It is also an important counterpoint to another of the act's key drives: that, for all Shelley's focus on the vitality of motion within his work, what is equivocally valorised in this opening act is the power of the static – of Prometheus' endurance in time – to see (even if we cannot categorically say that it *brings about*) a change in the world. As we have seen, both Byron and Shelley regularly imbue the static with motion, and in *Prometheus Unbound* we see stasis *in extremis* presented as the ultimate means to experience thoroughgoing change, with the “slowly break[ing]” dawn functioning as, firstly, an effective representation of this and, secondly and simultaneously, a worrying of the boundaries between stasis and motion itself by placing static “endure[d]” existence against a background displaying the pointed-up mobility of temporality.

It is clear, then, that before a word is spoken Shelley presents us with a text whose staging and prefatory materials exhibit a profound relational complexity. It has rightly been said of the poem that it “remodels genres and traditions to articulate Shelley's most original and sublime imagining of freedom.”<sup>13</sup> It also engages with the paradoxes of such an endeavour, and does so both narratively and performatively. This occurs in the extent to which Prometheus within the narrative seeks a new mode of being whose definition is not simply a negative function of the old; in the extent to which the tendrils of tradition and genre conventions inhere in any process of remodelling and impinge upon the possibilities of originality and freedom;<sup>14</sup> and in the extent to which

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<sup>13</sup> *SMW*, 743.

<sup>14</sup> Where Byron sets great store by truthful representation, Shelley tends to valorise originality, as his correspondence of 1821 suggests. In a letter of 17 April to Byron he wishes “that you would subdue yourself to the great task of building up a poem containing within itself the germs of a permanent relation to the present, and to all succeeding ages!”; on 10 August 1821, after reading canto V of *Don Juan*, he writes to Mary: “it may be vanity, but I think I see the trace of my earnest exhortations to him

these two forms of relation and engagement relate to and engage with each other, and the ways in which they engage with the movement between the problematic freedoms of non-articulation and the restrictions of poetic creation's potential for rigidity, and with the movement between stasis and motion. In terms of these latter two concerns of the thesis, it is my contention that, as with *Don Juan*'s English cantos for Byron, *Prometheus Unbound* offers particular challenges to Shelley not present in quite the same way in the poems studied so far.

## II

Discussion of *Prometheus Unbound* tends to arrive at the subject of relation either obliquely or by proxy, focusing not on relation *per se* but on an aspect of the lyrical drama which is relational in nature, whether that be Bloom's making or unmaking of myth,<sup>15</sup> Hogle's transference,<sup>16</sup> Wasserman's manifestations of the One Mind,<sup>17</sup> or Yeats' Great Memory.<sup>18</sup> In others, relation is touched upon as an adjunct to more localised analyses, as in the work of Sperry and Keach, in their discussions of change and evanescence respectively.<sup>19</sup> Often, it is in the undercurrents of their precise forms of articulation that such criticism is most valuable. When Wasserman argues that "Shelley's insistence that only thought, or mind, is eternal" unequivocally "demands that we assign Prometheus his role ... in Shelley's metaphysics of idealism," and that "he must be whatever Shelley's philosophy provides for as eternal and immutable,"<sup>20</sup>

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to create something wholly new"; and on 21 October, after reading cantos III, IV and V, he begins his praise of the poem in a letter to Byron with: "it is a poem totally of its own species ... this poem carries with it at once the stamp of originality and a defiance of imitation. Nothing has ever been written like it in English—nor if I may venture to prophesy, will there be." *LPBS*, vol. ii, 284; 323; 357.

<sup>15</sup> Bloom.

<sup>16</sup> Hogle.

<sup>17</sup> Wasserman.

<sup>18</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A. H. Bullen, 1903), 112-13.

<sup>19</sup> Sperry; Keach.

<sup>20</sup> Wasserman, 255.



it is an “insistence” Wasserman has found not specifically within the lyrical drama but elsewhere in Shelley’s writings, and thus the argument is predicated upon an ascription of consistency and uncomplicated ardency of thought on the part of Shelley which is questionable, and in doing so analytical possibilities are closed off to Wasserman’s otherwise incisive reading. Wasserman offers something valuable when he begins his analysis by making the point that “any interpretation of *Prometheus Unbound* as a work of ‘poetic idealism’ will necessarily be conditioned by a determination of the drama’s area of reference, the level of reality at which it is enacted; and this in turn must be a function of what its protagonist represents.”<sup>21</sup> Yet at the same time we should acknowledge that representation itself may be a theatre of contention within the work: part of “the drama’s area of reference,” a “level of reality” both “at which” and *with* which “it is enacted.”

Stuart Sperry, commenting on the “vernal spirit of the play,”<sup>22</sup> states that:

... very simply, the change that *Prometheus [Unbound]* from its very beginning dramatizes is the reflection of Shelley’s hope, a hope assuming in its pertinacity the strength of faith, that spring will follow winter, that the reign of mercy and peace will some day succeed the dominion of hatred and oppression. Shelley trusted that ... the golden years must at length return—that, in the words of a motto on a ring he cherished, “Il buon tempo verra,” the good times will come.<sup>23</sup>

As Chapter Two explores, such ascription of fixed opinion is ever problematic in Shelley and the workings of faith are often subtilized; as such, Sperry in the conclusion of his point falls foul of Bloom’s claim that “the uncritical millenarianism that critics

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>22</sup> Sperry, 78.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 79.

have found in [*Prometheus Unbound*] is what they have brought to the poem themselves.”<sup>24</sup> Yet Sperry’s description of “a hope assuming in its pertinacity the strength of faith” expresses well part of that which is most rewarding about sections of the first act of the lyrical drama, including lines which, seen in precisely this way, give a differing perspective on elements of Sperry’s own argument. For example, Sperry argues that, in the service of Shelley’s “intention” to create a “radically visionary and transforming work, a work above all exemplary in intention and effect,”<sup>25</sup> lines 55-58 are necessarily “perfunctory”<sup>26</sup> – that, in deliberately failing to “more fully illuminate the grounds for change within Prometheus himself,”<sup>27</sup> Shelley is better able to present Prometheus as “an infinitely suggestive prototype of human perfection,”<sup>28</sup> in keeping with the poet’s view of the Titan as expressed in the Preface.<sup>29</sup> However, the lines do not exist in isolation, and the extent to which their nature is “perfunctory” is complicated by the lines which immediately precede them, much of the achievement of which derives from the tensions at play between the Titan as “type” and Titan as poignantly individualised and humanised:

Disdain! Ah no! I pity thee. What ruin  
 Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!  
 How will thy soul, cloven to its depth with terror,  
 Gape like a hell within! I speak in grief,  
 Not exultation, for I hate no more,  
 As then, ere misery made me wise. The curse  
 Once breathed on thee I would recall.

(I. 53-58)

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<sup>24</sup> Bloom, 94.

<sup>25</sup> Sperry, 77.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> “... Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends.”

Michael O'Neill observes line 53's "authentically unconvincing repression of antagonism towards Jupiter";<sup>30</sup> Christine Gallant characterises Prometheus' "pity" in the line as a "masked aggression."<sup>31</sup> To these observations we might add the triple inflections of "what ruin / Will hunt thee undefended through wide Heaven!": the first – the emphatic, even gloating anticipation in "what ruin" – is complicated by its isolation at the end of the line in another instance of that "subtly disjunctive pause" which Keach has noted can imbue Shelleyan enjambment, such that we hear a second inflection in the form of a genuine interrogative asking what precise form that ruin will take; and thirdly, smaller still but strong enough to impinge on our affective response, a second form of interrogative which so often whispers behind the declarative in Shelley's verse, asking *whether*, for all the ostensible assurance, ruin *will* in fact hunt Jupiter. As Timothy Webb has observed, the negative formation "undefended" is a fitting term to use in imagining the overthrow of a figure who, like the God-figures of Blake, epitomises proscription: Webb notes that "Prometheus anticipates the fall of Jupiter in terms which appropriately suggest his emptiness and the means he employs to terrify others."<sup>32</sup> Yet it is this very aptness which gives the line a sense of projected wish-fulfilment amidst its resoluteness, whilst the word's construction simultaneously admits of the possibility of defence – the possibility that humanity might not come to see Jupiter as mind-forged, and the possibility that Shelley's lyrical drama might not aid humanity in doing so. Like Shelley himself, his Prometheus is simultaneously defiantly certain and hopefully uncertain.

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<sup>30</sup> O'Neill, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Gallant, *Shelley's Ambivalence*, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Webb, "The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus Unbound*," *SPP*, 694-711, 697.

Such undercurrents of feeling ripple down the lines to subtilize our response to the lines which follow. The breeze of the “Ode to the West Wind” blows across this opening act in a number of ways, and like that poem’s ending, which seems to hover between the declarative of the final line’s draft and the conditional interrogative of its final version,<sup>33</sup> Prometheus’ defiance is subtilized in its performative relation to the lines around it. “Undefended” begins to look both ways between envisaged predator and prey, and the attempted confidence of enjambment and free-flowing metre in lines 53-54 gives way to the caesurae of lines 55-56, half driving home its assurances and half hesitant, with the same triple inflections in place but this time with the syntax of “how will thy soul” (55) rather than “how thy soul will” placing doubt rather than indomitable assurance in the ascendancy. As a result of following this, the “perfunctory” nature of lines 56-58 hovers between, on the one hand, the expression of the bland strength of hate-free endurance necessary for the attenuation of relation Prometheus seeks, and on the other, a weary giving-over, an attenuation of hope for release from relation. It is a delicately balanced and tender sensibility whose tenor has more in common with Prometheus’ penultimate utterance of Act 1 than at first seems to be the case:

All things are still: alas! how heavily  
 This quiet morning weighs upon my heart;  
 Though I should dream, I could even sleep with grief,  
 If slumber were denied not. I would fain  
 Be what it is my destiny to be,  
 The saviour and the strength of suffering man,  
 Or sink into the original gulf of things:  
 There is no agony, and no solace left;  
 Earth can console, Heaven can torment no more.  
(I. 812-20)

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<sup>33</sup> The poem ends: “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” (70). As Leader and O’Neill note, in the Bodleian Shelley Manuscript 5 draft the poem ends with “When Winter comes Spring lags not far behind.” *SMW*, 763.

Michael O'Neill notes that "the polemical bite of that final line, with its reversal of orthodox valuations of Earth and Heaven, suggests one source of energy in Prometheus' language. But a deeper source is the mirroring of the hero's struggle by the poet's own struggle to create an appropriate myth."<sup>34</sup> Thus, in his focus on what is, from Sperry's perspective, deliberately not subtilized by Shelley, Sperry glances towards that which *is* subtilized in the work in relation to Prometheus as a "prototype of human perfection." Additionally, this "deeper source" is less acknowledged by Sperry in his consideration of lines 55-58 than it might be, and consequently so is the fact that, as O'Neill suggests, "the intermittent success of the poetry in Act I has to do with the laying bare of this second struggle."<sup>35</sup>

Two additional things may be said of the comparison between these two extracts from Act One. Firstly, that whilst critics may at times miss the contribution of the "deeper source" of "energy" in the Act, the extent to which that deeper source manifests itself – i.e. the extent to which the "poet's own struggle" impinges on our response as a facet of the "hero's struggle" – is not uniform across the Act, such that its surfacings and submergings, convergences and divergences between hero and poet may themselves be contributors of energy. Secondly, my statement in the Introduction that in Shelley the ostensibly polemical is often performatively dialogical might be pressed into the service of a reconsideration of the "polemical bite" of that final line of Prometheus' penultimate speech. Line 812 may indeed express a "reversal of orthodox valuations

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<sup>34</sup> O'Neill, 102.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102.

of Earth and Heaven” if we take “Earth can console” as an unambiguously discrete clause and “no more” as unambiguously having only a single referent in the line, but Shelley surely allows in the line’s construction the possibility, in-keeping with the powerfully imperfectly-expressed statement of unfeeling and untouched emptiness of the earlier lines, that neither the Earth *nor* Heaven is capable of consolation for Prometheus, and thus our overall response to the line may be Prometheus feeling at one and the same time that Earth can and cannot console.

Sperry notes that “Shelley regarded [the lyrical drama] as his masterpiece, and it is the most deliberately composed of all his major works.”<sup>36</sup> Yet it is when the energies of relational complexity wink along the brim of this deliberation that the poem sparkles. I would question the implicit valorisation of the conscious within Sperry’s assertion that “although one can read the play as a reflection of his unconscious drives and fantasies, serious study demands that we start with his conscious aims and intentions,”<sup>37</sup> yet at the same time whilst I have some sympathy with the general drift of Bloom’s statement that “whatever Shelley the man may have believed ... is of slight importance to my study compared to what Shelley’s poem believes and communicates,”<sup>38</sup> this too fails to tell the full story of Shelley’s poetic making. I would add to both that “serious study demands” not only an exploration of “unconscious drives and fantasies,” “conscious aims and intentions,” “whatever Shelley the man may have believed” *and* “what Shelley’s poem believes and communicates,” but also both how these operate in complex dialogue with each other and, often, what we may mean by some of the constituent terms.

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<sup>36</sup> Sperry, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>38</sup> Bloom, 94.

Critical awareness of the critical awareness the text itself displays in its operations leads us towards a fuller understanding of the interactions of relation in the poem. In the Introduction I suggest that Bloom is only partly in the right in his redressing of a critical underattendance to Shelley's "awareness of what he was doing," in that the picture with regards to Shelley's poetic operations is more complex than his statement implies. Similarly, whilst Martin Buber's *I-it/I-thou* distinction as applied by Bloom in *Shelley's Mythmaking* is a useful one insofar as it points towards the subject of differing degrees of difference and sameness with which this thesis seeks to engage,<sup>39</sup> for me Bloom overstates the assumed binary of *distinction* over the complications of *degree*, and as a consequence rarely touches upon the performative operation of the *I-it/I-thou* interaction itself. Whilst he is right to warn against narrow "allegorizing" (such as "source-hunting for Demogorgon") and "intentionalistic fixation drawn from Shelley's life, prose, or other verse,"<sup>40</sup> the warnings' ostensible applicability to Wasserman's notion of the One Mind as it pertains to *Prometheus Unbound* should not deter us from wondering whether Bloom, too, might, in a recourse to Buber which he acknowledges as "of course heuristic,"<sup>41</sup> be at times imbuing a binary distinction with too *much* distinction than is warranted. Consequently, though I would agree with Bloom in feeling "forced to amend Fogle's dualistic view"<sup>42</sup> of "the action of *Prometheus Unbound* [as] a symbolic struggle between Cold, representing Evil, Reaction, and Death; and Warmth, the emblem of Good, Life, and Liberation,"<sup>43</sup> Bloom's attention to the Buberan distinction may be guilty of a "dualistic view" of its

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1-10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Harter Fogle, *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley: A Comparative Study* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1949), 76. Quoted in Bloom, *Mythmaking*, 91.

own which is less warranted by the lyrical drama's actual operations than might at first seem to be the case.

As I have suggested earlier in this thesis, Jerrold Hogle's analysis of Shelley's work is valuable in its exploration of process and the propensity for constructions in Shelley's work to exist in a state of continual "becoming-other."<sup>44</sup> However, it at times underestimates the influence of undertows of fixity in the vitalising of the poet's work and the extent to which the poet's turning-away and becoming-other is not only from the deleteriously fixed but also, paradoxically, from the deleteriously mobile. He is right, however, to critique both the early Bloom's focus on Shelley as a maker of myth and other approaches which see the poem in terms of Shelley "trying to develop the syncretizing tendencies in several myth-historians"<sup>45</sup> of the period. Fundamentally, Hogle's notion of the Shelley of *Prometheus Unbound* as an "anti-mythologist" enacting the "unchaining [of] mythography"<sup>46</sup> is an apposite one, and it points towards one of the ways in which *Prometheus Unbound* is so significant in terms of the present study – a key crux of the poem lies in a poet so focused on relation and interaction aiming, however equivocally, to wrest away an originary and self-sustaining, externally non-reactive and non-referential state of being for the world. This wresting-away is complicated by both the complexity of the wresting (as explored primarily in Act One of the lyrical drama) and the internally relational nature of that new vision (as explored in the later acts). Shelley in his poetic making and Prometheus within the product of that making each attempt that which appears impossible; each nearly succeeds; each finds value in the nearness of success which is itself its own audacious,

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<sup>44</sup> Hogle, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 167.



fallible and human form of successfulness. In this sense, what attracts Shelley to his endeavour and the reader to his work is that which, as I explored in Chapter Three, attracts Byron and his poet-figures to the perfect imperfection of ruin.

William Keach says of “evanescence or ‘fading’ or ‘decay’” that it “becomes for Shelley an intrinsic feature of the mind’s most precious experiences. The value of such experiences, he [Shelley] suggests, is as much a function of ‘the desire and the regret they leave’ as it is of any initial immediacy or fullness of presence.”<sup>47</sup> This is true of Byron too and, as Chapter Three suggests, this is for Byron often encapsulated in his depiction of and treatment of ruination; in *Prometheus Unbound*, what Keach suggests is true of evanescence is also true of relation, in that the poetry powerfully expresses a seeking of a breaking away from origin and influence but equally powerfully expresses an affecting awareness of its failure – which, in turn, may be compared with a similar dynamic in Byron’s English cantos, as the next chapter will show.

As with much of Shelley’s work, then, in addition to being what it also is, the poetic product is ever a comment upon the poetic process. What is particularly interesting about Hogle’s approach to *Prometheus Unbound* is its tendency to only obliquely touch upon, and occasionally perhaps misattribute or singly attribute, this important element in our understanding of the lyrical drama: the wider interaction between the complex and minestrewn processes of mythmaking/unmaking and the act of poetic making and articulation itself as a corollary of the potential for tyranny being enacted in the lyrical drama’s narrative. Hogle argues that “Jupiter for Shelley is a ‘self-idealization,’ a raised up superego, who at first seemed to help Prometheus be ‘king

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<sup>47</sup> Keach, 119.

over [him] self' (l. 492) by way of a defining self-extension in an Other," only to find that "Prometheus has unintentionally 'reified and institutionalized ... a tyranny [of the human mind]' over itself."<sup>48</sup> Hogle's instincts are right to posit the text as in part exploring the dangers of giving "transference a personal will, or (we might say) controlling it enough to make it fashion a text granting the enlarged self a greater amount of willed power," in that it may mean "losing power over the personal will and reading its self-serving edicts on a 'scroll' that claims absolute authority for a supreme volition apparently underwriting all the signs of the ruling text."<sup>49</sup> However, Hogle fails to explore the extent to which the projected will or projected other of the self created through projection might be argued to be, for Shelley, the poem itself, able to impose tyranny over mobile meaning. Prometheus' struggle to dethrone Jupiter through utterance may be said to mirror, in part, the struggle of "dethroning" the fixed text projected as an imperfect expression of thoughts which are beyond articulation, and the playing-out of the problematic nature of each is central to the work.

The problems of so doing and the directions in which it may take a text involve not only a maintaining of the mobility of the unarticulated within the fixed text but ultimately a possible retreat into non-articulation. Shelley's exploration of the curse in Act One of the lyrical drama posits it as a kind of Shibboleth whose only right framing is, ultimately, a non-framing.<sup>50</sup> The potential tyranny of Prometheus even as he seeks and seems to remove the tyranny of Jupiter is the tyranny of the created text even as the creation seems and seeks to remove that tyranny through elucidation, exploration

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<sup>48</sup> Hogle, 103.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>50</sup> "Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce *it* right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand." *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Judges 12: 6.

and the offering of an alternative vision. In Hogle's exploration of the lyrical drama he attributes an analogical working of the text similar to this, but he applies it to the operations of social structures – Prometheus necessarily ever-tending towards being a “reincarnat[ion] ... [of] quarrels among classes, class-based ideas, religious systems, and human conceptions of him.”<sup>51</sup> However, it seems to me that the operations of poetic making are a more appropriate or at least additional analogical tenor, whose “throng of thoughts and forms” are themselves an operating “social structure,” in the sense of possessing deep interactive complexity within the space of the poem, as well as, Shelley might contend,<sup>52</sup> being a constituent part of the wider social structures of which Hogle speaks. Similarly, when Wasserman rightly makes the point that “arbitrary and tyrannical codes” as represented in the lyrical drama are, for Shelley, “fabricated by the mind, which then abdicates to these fictions its own powers and enslaves itself to its own creation,”<sup>53</sup> he stops short of addressing how the poem's multiple dialogic workings might be inflected by the poet's understanding of the possibility that the fixed poetic text might enact such an enslavement. Hogle postulates a hegemony, and correctly identifies the problem of “articulating ourselves within its terms even (in fact, especially) when we attack it head on,” but in his postulated solution – to “recontact the open play of many possible transfers at work beneath yet apparently exiled by the reigning deity or ruler”<sup>54</sup> – he fails to acknowledge that the open play of many possible transfers – even if it were possible – is not necessarily an effective solution, but might in fact have its own attendant dangers, dangers of which the text shows a performative cognisance: the movement between the twin

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<sup>51</sup> Hogle, 105.

<sup>52</sup> “The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed.” *A Defence of Poetry*, *SMW*, 680.

<sup>53</sup> Wasserman, 258.

<sup>54</sup> Hogle, 112.

meaninglessnesses of fixity and unarticulated motion. Additionally, Hogle does not give enough credit to the extent to which “attempt” is more important than “success” (as conventionally conceived) in Shelley’s work, and the dangers of success itself as another hegemony; another mythograph. It is my view that it is through a consideration of *Prometheus Unbound* from the perspective of its own relation with the complexities of relation and articulation that our understanding of both the lyrical drama and particular aspects of its critical history may be enhanced.

### III

Much of the focus of the first half of Act One is on imperfect articulation, non-articulation or the imperfect intelligibility of articulation, driven by Prometheus’ “recall[ing]” (I. 59) of his curse, whether we take this to mean remembering, revoking or restating through a proxy. The lyrical drama repeatedly draws attention to “the precarious status of voice”<sup>55</sup> within the work. The boundary-space of articulation and intelligibility is evocatively described as Prometheus, after asking “who dares” (I. 131) recall the curse, comments:

Ha, what an awful whisper rises up!  
‘Tis scarce like sound: it tingles through the frame  
As lightning tingles, hovering ere it strike.  
Speak, Spirit! From thine inorganic voice  
I only know that thou art moving near  
And love.

(I. 132-7)

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<sup>55</sup> Keach, 134.

A few lines later, the Earth attempts to overcome Prometheus' supposed inability (as an immortal) to hear the words, asking him to "earnestly hearken" (I. 145), and Locock postulates that "at this point it seems that the Earth speaks a few words (perhaps a part of the 'Curse') in the 'language of the dead,' in order to see if Prometheus can understand it."<sup>56</sup> Like the slow dawning of the day, much of what is most powerful in the lyrical drama's first act lies with that which is not said or not heard. Prometheus describes the effect of this language beyond understanding as "obscurely through my brain, like shadows dim, / Sweep awful thoughts, rapid and thick" (I. 146-47), making him "feel / Faint, like one mingled in entwining love; / Yet 'tis not pleasure" (I. 147-49). Earth states that the Curse is "preserve[d], a treasured spell" (I. 184), beyond articulation, by Earth's "innumerable seas and streams, / Mountains, and caves, and winds, and yon wide air, / And the inarticulate people of the dead" (I. 181-83).

Earth's "splendidly but imprecisely suggestive"<sup>57</sup> lines concerning "the Magus Zoroaster" (I. 192-218) have been much discussed as critics seek to penetrate their obliquities:

They shall be told. Ere Babylon was dust,  
The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child,  
Met his own image walking in the garden.  
That apparition, sole of men, he saw.  
For know there are two worlds of life and death:  
One that which thou beholdest; but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them and they part no more;  
Dreams, and the light imaginings of men.  
And all that faith creates or love desires,  
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous shapes.  
There thou art, and dost hang, a writhing shade,

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<sup>56</sup> Shelley, *Poems*, ed. C. D. Locock, 2 vols, 1911. Quoted in *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. ii, Everest and Matthews, 486.

<sup>57</sup> Bloom, 103.

‘Mid whirlwind-shaken mountains; all the Gods  
Are there, and all the Powers of nameless worlds,  
Vast, sceptred Phantoms; heroes, men, and beasts;  
And Demogorgon, a tremendous Gloom;  
And he, the Supreme Tyrant, on his throne  
Of burning gold.

(I. 191-209)

The Longman Shelley rightly notes the lines’ resonance with Plato’s Theory of Forms, and is right, too, to note that “Shelley’s conception does not match the Platonic contrast between the shadow-world in which we live and the reality we may ... see when we die.” The Longman goes on to argue that it “most closely resembles the Homeric Hades, inhabited by bloodless shadows of those who have lived on earth,” implicitly acknowledging therein that this, too, is not a perfect fit for the lines presented by Shelley.<sup>58</sup> Bloom is more explicit in acknowledging the lines’ originality, noting that “no source hunter has encountered an instance of Zoroaster running into himself in a garden or elsewhere, and a fairly desultory glance at Zoroastrian research literature discloses no doctrine resembling that expounded in the Earth’s speech”<sup>59</sup> – indeed, he argues elsewhere that “the critical fate of [Shelley’s] poetry has been obscured by allegorizers who have read it as Plato versified.”<sup>60</sup> On the passage as a whole, he suggests that they point towards an interpretation of the phrase “there are two worlds of life and death” (I. 195) as meaning “not, as might more commonly be said, a world of life and a world of death, but two worlds, each of which encompasses life *and* death. One is what we behold; the other is ‘underneath’ the ‘grave,’ grave here being a way of looking at our own world. When we die, our shadows will also die, and

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<sup>58</sup> *The Poems of Shelley*, vol. ii, Everest and Matthews, 489.

<sup>59</sup> Bloom, 103-104

<sup>60</sup> Harold Bloom, “Percy Bysshe Shelley,” *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, rev. ed. Harold Bloom (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 282-84, 282.

then death will unite us and our shadows.”<sup>61</sup> For Hogle, the “vast crypt of once-perceived and once-articulated ‘forms’” he sees depicted in the Earth’s words “is the cultural archive of former images,”<sup>62</sup> a representation of what Yeats came to think of as the “Great Memory”; Hogle comments that “here lies the source of the Titan’s inability *and* desire to break free from the past.”<sup>63</sup>

There is, of course, value in these unpickings of the lines’ obliquities. At the same time, in approaching the unravelling of Shelleyan ambiguities there is also value in being mindful of a possible failure on the part of the critic to acknowledge the centrality of the lines’ very obliquity to both their message and the reader’s affective response. As with Byron’s recourse to images of ruin, the imprecision of these lines’ suggestiveness is a key functional attribute. The response they gesture the reader towards is that of the lines as, ultimately, a series of equivocal gesturings-towards. Michael O’Neill suggests that “for all the accents of exposition ... what Shelley offers is phantasmagoria.”<sup>64</sup> This is correct specifically if we foreground the process of variated “offer[ing]” as part of what the reader detects, and acknowledge the equal importance of the “accents of exposition” as part of what is offered. Both the “phantasmagoria” and the “accents of exposition” are keyed against the settling of the series of fixed positions the lines point up even in their swerving from, with those fixed positions including adherence to a series of allegorical topoi, wholesale rejection of such representations, and the capacity of the reader to uncomplicatedly settle on the lines as nothing more than phantasmagoria, in much the same way that I have suggested that Shelley holds his poems’ capacities for the meaninglessnesses of too-

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<sup>61</sup> Bloom, 104

<sup>62</sup> Hogle, 176

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 176

<sup>64</sup> O’Neill, 94.

rigid fixity and too-fluid flux. To co-opt Yeats' words in his description of the Great Memory to which Hogle alludes in his discussion of *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley presents a "float[ing] up in the mind [of] profound symbols" which hold their capacity to, yet do not quite, "delude [us] into the dream that they are meaningless."<sup>65</sup>

In Chapter Four I pointed towards Shelley's performative awareness of the capacity of creation-through-language to conjure static icons constructed of and as fixed signifiers – the possibility that his work may enact a replacing with rigid hierarchies of his own the rigid hierarchies his poetry often seeks to challenge. *Prometheus Unbound* is charged with an awareness that what is true of the fixed text itself – the poem on the page – may also be true of the figured icons within the fixed text, and an important concomitant critical awareness of the poetry's meliorative currents in this regard can be lost in the critic's search for fixed delineations. As with the poet's and his poems' relation with words themselves, Shelley's lines in this passage reach at once towards and away from cultural allegories whose communicative capacity as conduits for complex conceptualisations is held equally with a urizenic propensity towards a static and limiting reductionism.

Just as whilst we ought to acknowledge the Preface's multiplicities we are also able to see an overarching focus on relation, so whilst we acknowledge the obliquities of the Magus Zoroaster lines we are also able to see a similar overarching focus. In this case

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<sup>65</sup> "Any one who has any experience of any mystical state of the soul knows how there float up in the mind profound symbols, whose meaning, if indeed they do not delude one into the dream that they are meaningless, one does not perhaps understand for years. Nor I think has any one, who has known that experience with any constancy, failed to find some day in some old book or on some old monument, a strange or intricate image, that had floated before him, and grow perhaps dizzy with the sudden conviction that our little memories are but part of some great memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the deep but a little foam upon the deep," Yeats, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, 112-13.



it is a repeated destabilisation of discreteness and sameness: the magus and his “image” as the same and not the same; the “two worlds” as being one “of life” and one “of death” or “two worlds” each “of life and death” (as Bloom has it); “forms” in “shadows of all forms” as suggesting or not suggesting the substantiality of those “that think and live”; whether “unite” and “part” mean, respectively, joining together and separating whilst still remaining discrete entities (as, for example, two people might unite and part) or actually becoming one; “the grave” as representing “that which thou beholdest” (as Bloom suggests) or not. Overarching these individual destabilisations is the wider destabilisation of the lines as representations of, modifications of or imperfect rejections of old allegories; as co-opting tropes in order to move beyond them, as expressing an inability to do so, and whether these two things are different or the same; and overarching these overarching destabilisations the yet wider destabilisation of whether the lines are imperfect articulations of the poet’s vision or a deliberately-commodified expression of imperfect articulation as a means of articulating the ineffability of that which is being presented.

With regard to the last of these negotiations, Earth’s speech closes with an image of framed vacancy, with “the revenge / Of the Supreme ... sweep[ing] through vacant shades / As rainy wind through the abandoned gate / Of a fallen palace” (I. 215-18). In the later sections of Chapter Seven we will encounter similar lines as Byron repeatedly depicts framed absence in his search for meaning, and, like Byron towards the end of the English cantos, spatial and aural indistinctness are depicted alongside one another, as Ione describes, “aris[ing]” “through [the] ... silver shade” and “lulling plumes” of her wings “a Shape, a throng of sounds” (I. 224-26), Panthea adding to the description that “the sound is of whirlwind underground, / Earthquake, and fire, and

mountains cloven; / The Shape is awful like the sound, / Clothed in dark purple, star-inwoven” (I. 231-34). Just as the beginning of the Magus Zoroaster speech appears pregnant with profound and strangely eloquent non-articulation (as O’Neill notes, in the first line of that speech it seems as if “there is a significant gap between ‘they shall be told’ and the words that follow”),<sup>66</sup> so the closing of the speech and the lines which follow it repeatedly point towards the complexities of imperfect articulation, comprehension and realisation. In describing *Prometheus Unbound* as “an extended meditation on voice, language, and the peculiarities of communication,”<sup>67</sup> Karen Weisman expresses what I hold to be a key concern of the lyrical drama. It is a meditation which extends beyond the verbal, both in terms of the poem’s formal operations and also in its engagement with the unarticulated.

The Phantasm of Jupiter, in commenting upon his own lack of volition, asks “what unaccustomed sounds / Are hovering on my lips” (I. 242-43), Prometheus responding with “speak the words which I would hear, / Although no thought inform thy empty voice” (I. 248-49), and Earth calling upon the “gray mountains, and old woods, and haunted springs, / Prophetic caves, and isle-surrounding streams” (I. 251-52) to “listen!” (I. 250) and “rejoice to hear what yet ye cannot speak” (I. 253). After the curse is uttered Prometheus asks of Earth, “were these my words, O Parent?” (I. 302). Shelley responds to the challenges of language’s imperfection by separating that which is expressed from the mediating complexities of the process of expression. He does so by giving over the utterance itself to a proxy which is the ultimate Aeolian conduit: the Phantasm of Jupiter, like the representations Byron increasingly comes to

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<sup>66</sup> O’Neill, 94.

<sup>67</sup> Karen A. Weisman, *Imageless Truths: Shelley’s Poetic Fictions* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1994), 83.

employ in the later cantos of his great epic, is a framed space; a framed absence. Shelley's challenge is Prometheus': to negotiate the difficulty of having to explain a different default, a different way of perceiving the world and a different vision for that world, with all the attendant problems this engenders. As such, Prometheus' calling up of an agencyless avatar to enact the utterance has a corollary in Shelley's focus on communications beyond verbal articulation throughout the first act as a means of ameliorating language's tendency towards fixed or unwieldy, baggage-ridden forms. The specific use of the Phantasm of Jupiter hovers in the same space which Shelley's poem, including its Preface, inhabits: between on the one hand a new imagining which boldly asserts its newness by daring to co-opt and reconfigure existing forms, and on the other an expression of a failure to do so.

On one level, this is the audacious and unreachable challenge of the lyrical drama: to create something anew which is not communicated as being a departure from what has gone before: a replacement which breaks the fetters of being a *re-* anything. The paradox – or one paradox – of Act One of *Prometheus Unbound* is that what is in fact explored is this challenge itself *as* the lyrical drama: process intermingles with product, end with means and hero with poet such that relation and articulation come to be theme and focus of the Act. The Act both engages with and presents a retreat from both myth and language as twin forms of inflexible and baggage-laden means of expression of that which the poet wishes to convey. In the giving-over of the curse to the Phantasm of Jupiter, an “empty voice” with “no thought,” Shelley presents a retreat from language imbued with the unavoidable deviations and biases inherent in the process of articulation, thus attempting to create the “trumpet of a prophecy” (69)<sup>68</sup> he

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<sup>68</sup> “Ode to the West Wind.”

asks the West Wind to be in his Ode, yet the giving-over cannot help but express the possibility it is attempt only.

Alongside this focus on the aurally unarticulated throughout Act One lies its visual corollary, the framed absence or the ill-delineated “shape” (“shape,” “shapes” or “shapeless” appearing fourteen times in the first act).<sup>69</sup> Mercury comments on Prometheus’ “worn form” (I. 359), and it is an apt descriptor of that to which Shelley appears to seek repeated recourse in Act One: verbally or physically, the unformed, the half-formed, the imperfectly-formed. The Furies, products of “the all-miscreative brain of Jove” (I. 448) state “the shade which is our form invests us round. / Else we are shapeless as our mother Night” (I. 471-72); one Fury interrupts another’s speech with: “Speak not—whisper not: / I know all that ye would tell, / But to speak might break the spell / Which must bend the Invincible, / The stern of thought; / He yet defies the deepest power of Hell” (I. 533-38). Articulation and non-articulation each hold power in the poem: Prometheus seeks to “recall” the curse but will only do so through a proxy; a Fury expresses concern that articulation may “break the spell”; Jupiter is threatened by Prometheus’ non-articulation of the secret Jupiter wishes to know; and Shelley’s text like all his texts is threatened by the twin meaninglessnesses of unformed non-articulation and imperfect articulation impinged upon by the fixed forms of well-used language and myth.

In Act Two Demogorgon states that “a voice / Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless” (I. 115-16). Shelley’s lyrical drama seeks, as the other Shelley poems within this thesis seek, to negotiate a space which attempts to voice this wanting voice and image the

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<sup>69</sup> *PU* I. 22; 36; 202; 226; 233; 322; 449; 472; 587; 713; 742; 752; 765; 807.

imageless truth, and as with the other Shelley poems within this thesis, what is most affecting about the work is our sense of the negotiating process itself. The chorus of Spirits towards the end of Act One in their differing ways inhabit this middle ground between articulation and non-articulation, the formed and the unformed. The first spirit flees “on a battle-trumpet’s blast” (I. 694), the second on “the sigh” (I. 720) of a self-martyring shipwrecked sailor, the third on either “a Dream” or “the shade its lustre made,” depending on how we interpret Shelley’s lines (I. 726; 732), the fifth rises “like some swift cloud” (I. 764); the sixth meditates on the “delica[cy]” of “Desolation” (I. 772). In each case they operate in the mobile and shifting spaces between the fully formed and delineated and the unformed and unconveyed.

This is perhaps most clearly pointed-up in the description given by the Fourth Spirit:

On a poet’s lips I slept  
 Dreaming like a love-adept  
 In the sound his breathing kept;  
 Nor seeks nor finds he mortal blisses,  
 But feeds on the aerial kisses  
 Of shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses.  
 He will watch from dawn to gloom  
 The lake reflected sun illumine  
 The yellow bees i’ the ivy-bloom,  
 Nor heed nor see what things they be;  
 But from these create he can  
 Forms more real than living man,  
 Nurslings of immortality!

(I. 737-49)

Critical attention to these lines tends to engage with the distinctions they appear to present. However, such criticism often stops short of addressing, first, the way in which Shelley’s lines operate a counter-movement of dissolution even in the making

of those distinctions and, secondly, the way in which the lines not only postulate a position on the processes of poetic making but simultaneously – indeed pre-emptively – adopt a self-questioning stance on that postulated position’s actualisation. To use a germane example, Timothy Webb argues that “what is at issue” in the Fourth Spirit’s words is “the limited nature of sense impressions (represented by the lake-reflected sun illumining the bees) as opposed to the creative force of imaginative perception (shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses).”<sup>70</sup> Webb’s perspective is predicated on both a belief that “for Shelley reflections in water were often deceptive” and also on the “lake reflected sun” as a neo-Platonist image which “in Shelley’s symbolical world” is a “symbol which seems to have been connected with the beautiful appearance of the natural world, attractive but essentially illusory,” such that “the water reflects the sun but distorts it and disperses its concentrated force so that, for all its radiance, it only presents us with a shadowy representation of the real sun.”<sup>71</sup> However, whilst the “lake reflected sun” may be a neo-Platonist symbol, it is also, as with the image of the “old palaces and towers / Quivering within the wave’s intenser day” of “Baiae’s bay” (31-32) in the “Ode to the West Wind,” a depiction of nature, and as such is interactive in “the creative force of imaginative perception” rather than in uncomplicated dualistic opposition to it, if only in its instructive function when apprehended as a symbol in pointing towards the very existence of “forms more real than living man.” What is enacted in the lines is not so much the “limited nature of sense impressions ... as opposed to the creative force of imaginative perception” as the paradoxically creative force of sense impressions’ nature *as* limited. Thus the

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<sup>70</sup> Webb, 61.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 61.

“shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses” are not placed in the lines as unambiguously discrete from and uninvolved with the physical world.

Kenneth Neill Cameron, quoting lines 743-49 above, comments that “the poet,” who “represents the imaginative, creative spirit in literature,” is “able to project ‘idealisms’ from the actual: ‘Forms more real than living man.’”<sup>72</sup> Cameron’s “able to” echoes line 747’s “can” as suggestive of a pointing up of theoretical possibility, of creation *in potential* rather than actualisation, just as the Fourth Spirit is positioned on the cusp of, rather than in, the process of the “creat[ion]” and “form[ation]” it postulates in lines 747-49. Shelley’s poetry encodes an inhabitation of this space “on a poet’s lips,” ever poised in the moment of potential articulation before the entropic and entroping calcifying of utterance. Like Byron’s image of ruination, the poet’s inspiration lies in the “worn form[s]” and mobile interrelation of things. These “nurslings of immortality” (l. 749) are the products not of full-formation nor of the utterly unformed but of a negotiated and shifting mediation between the two, just as their expression rests not in the utterly unspoken nor the sharply defined and delineated utterance but in the vitalising instability between these two states.

#### IV

The lyrical drama’s second act maintains the interactive subtlety of shades of feeling we have seen elsewhere in Shelley. At times it does so with a tenderness deriving from the operation of confictions above and beneath the lines’ ostensible expressions of feeling. For example, even as the opening lines’ apostrophe to the Spring offer an affirmative response to the concluding interrogative of the “Ode to the West Wind,”

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<sup>72</sup> Cameron, *Shelley: The Golden Years*, 498.

between the initial invocation and Panthea's entrance Asia's lines possess a plangency deriving from a bittersweet and multi-layered liminality:

From all the blasts of heaven thou has descended:  
Yes, like a spirit, like a thought, which makes  
Unwonted tears throng to the horny eyes,  
And beating haunt the desolated heart,  
Which should have learnt repose: thou hast descended  
Cradled in tempests; thou dost wake, O Spring!  
O child of many winds! As suddenly  
Thou comest as the memory of a dream,  
Which now is sad because it hath been sweet;  
Like genius, or like joy which riseth up  
As from the earth, clothing with golden clouds  
The desert of our life ...  
This is the season, this the day, the hour;  
(II. i. 1-13)

Like the Spring, the ostensible warmth of the lines seem "cradled in tempests" of discomfiture, ill at ease with themselves. Part of the lines' affecting power is in the obtrusion of relief and wariness into the lines. What elevates them to lines of great tenderness is the curious and delicate sense that the lines surprise themselves by the palpability of those obtrusions: not just that there is a queasy distress underlying their ostensible statements, but that they are in some way incapable of their own distress in this regard. What we gain, in fact, is precisely the "sense of the irruptive disturbance of unmastered moments" which Gavin Hopps notes in Byron and which I discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>73</sup> Line three's "throng[ing]" of "unwonted tears" to the "horny eyes" may express well the sense the passage ultimately evokes, but it is a sense derived not from Asia's ostensible joy at the coming of Spring but from something more subtle, the cross-currents of an emotional countervail leading to the meta-

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<sup>73</sup> *Byron's Ghosts*, 16.



emotional overall effect of the kind of intra-emotional response we have seen before in locutions such as *Alastor*'s "subdued by its own pathos." In the instance of Asia's words, the passage earns the tenderness of line three's response by conveying a sense that on the level of narrative it *doesn't* earn them, that they are trying a little too hard and they don't believe what they express. The succession of similes does not convey, as a similar succession does in the "Ode to the West Wind," a wrestling with the expression of ineffability; rather, it opens a gap of vital instability between what is being said and what is being believed, the two quick "like"s of line two reaching back to shift the same line's "yes" from bland but sincere affirmation to a strained protesting-too-much which pervades all the way into the driven anaphora of line thirteen, aided by the bleak permanence of "desolated" and the hanging persistence of "desert of our life." William Keach notes elsewhere in *Prometheus Unbound* that "Shelley's speed can operate antithetically or dialectically within the total experience of a particular passage."<sup>74</sup> In lines 6-7 above the same is true of speed's absence, the apostrophes to the Spring offering prosodic enervation even as it gives semantic affirmation to the "sudden[ness]" of the season's change.

Appropriately enough, the phrase "which makes / Unwonted tears throng to the horny eyes" stands grammatically where much of the lyrical drama lies: in the interstices of the literal and the figural, in this instance hovering between being an extension of the second simile of line two and being a description of Asia's physiological response to the coming of Spring. Its role in our response, however, lies partly on the level of self-reflexivity. As rhetoric and as literal response to stimuli it feels overwrought, but in

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<sup>74</sup> Keach, 171. Keach makes his point in relation to II. iv. 129-40, rightly suggesting its representativeness of Shelley's poetic making on other occasions.

our affective acknowledgement of this it earns its reader response as we feel – because we experience as unguarded and true – Asia’s tender ambivalence. What impresses upon us is Asia’s doubt-flecked hope in her own hope as well as Shelley’s similar response in relation to the vision presented by the “incantation of this verse” (65);<sup>75</sup> as such, the lines present an enactment not only of Demogorgon’s call to “hope till Hope creates / From its own wreck the thing it contemplates” (IV. 573-74), but also the very delicacy of that position: both its potential and its potential untenability. As such, the “throng[ing]” of “unwonted tears” to the “horny eyes” is an emotional epithet imperfectly involved in meaning-making on one level, which also operates as a transferred emotional epithet as it functions on another, reflexive level, which is perfectly descriptive of our response to its imperfect involvement in meaning-making on the first level. To put it another way, the source of its effectiveness on one level of poetic making is its ineffectiveness on another.

In “The Supplement of Reading,” Tilottama Rajan suggests “a model of Romantic discourse which is neither hermeneutic nor Derridean but heuristic.”<sup>76</sup> Such a model is valuable but only if we acknowledge the heuristic propensity as one of several “infrashapes” (to return to McFarland’s term discussed in the Introduction) within a poetics which essays between and operates in dialogic congress with the potential sameness and separateness of the text and that which it imperfectly represents. However, although I suggest that Shelley’s text engages with its own nature as potentially hermeneutic, Derridean *and* heuristic, in such instances as these lines we see particularly clearly Rajan’s sense, as noted in Chapter Three in relation to Byron’s

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<sup>75</sup> “Ode to the West Wind.”

<sup>76</sup> *New Literary History* 17 (1986): 573-94 (580).

poet-figure contemplating ruination, that “the actualization of the work’s significance is displaced from the text itself to the reading process.”<sup>77</sup>

The particular tenor of this opening to Act Two has much in common with a key aspect of the lyrical drama’s achievement: not simply its combination of strength and fragility but the clear indissolubility of the two, each dependent on the other. Shelley’s lines often seem to rise through thermals on the strength of will, with their power lying as much in their engagement with forces against which they imperfectly strain as in their intermittent moments of won freedom from them. The achievement of such a position is by its nature delicately poised, its potential strength lying in the fact that it is on the verge of dissolution. As such, the multi-layered and delicate emotional key of these lines operates on both a relational and metarelational level. It is relational in its dialogic attention to its self-conflicting emotional substrata. Its metarelational status is also delicate and self-conflicting in nature, in that by its own interaction with itself it simultaneously staves off the potential rigidity of the text as a holding of unbending positions – the text’s potential to be what Shelley’s Jupiter is to man: a form of self-made tyranny – whilst also questioning its own achievement through self-subversion. On one level, what the journey from the beginning of Act Two to the end of Act Four dramatizes is burgeoning recovery and burgeoning hope; on another, it is a journey towards understanding that these are not so much mutually supporting as in fact the same thing. A predicate of this position is a dissolution of the distinction between process and product, striving and success, and a predicate of such a dissolution is an

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 580.

inherent fragility in the bones of the position. Moreover, it is a fragility entwined with the fragilities of language to articulate that vision of hope, and, more specifically, the fragility of the lyrical drama itself to embody it.

The distinctness of failure and success could not be problematized more completely than they are in these lines, as they performatively express through language the paradoxically communicative power of language's communicative limits. In so doing they set the tone for an act which exhibits a continuing focus on non-verbal communication, on positions on the cusp of articulation, and on the border spaces between subsumation and discrete identity. These three elements often intermingle, as in Panthea's early description of:

Our young Ione's soft and milky arms  
Locked then, as now, behind my dark, moist hair,  
While my shut eyes and cheek were pressed within  
The folded depth of her life-breathing bosom  
(II. i. 46-49)

The lines, which initiate the increased intermingling between the two characters which takes place throughout the act, are followed immediately by a description of communicative non-articulation and the imperfect communication of articulation:

... I am made the wind  
Which fails beneath the music that I bear  
Of thy most wordless converse; since dissolved  
Into the sense with which love talks, my rest  
Was troubled and yet sweet; my waking hours  
Too full of care and pain.  
*Asia.* Lift up thine eyes,  
And let me read thy dream.  
*Panthea.* As I have said ...  
(II. i. 50-56)

The hemistichomythic intertwining in line 56 of the “read” of Asia’s response and the “said” of Panthea’s reply accentuates the border-space between linguistic and non-linguistic communication in which the opening to Act Two operates. Similarly, Panthea’s description of Prometheus’ voice, which “fell / Like music which makes giddy the dim brain, / Faint with intoxication of keen joy” (II. i. 65-67) and “whose accents lingered ere they died / Like footsteps of far melody” (II. i. 88-89), is characterised as possessing a linguistic communicativeness but one which exists amidst the non-linguistic hovering beyond our ken: “thy name / Among the many sounds alone I heard / Of what might be articulate” (II. i. 89-91). Asia rejects articulation as imperfect and seeks recourse to another communicative form: “Thou speakest, but thy words / Are as the air: I feel them not ... Oh, lift / Thine eyes, that I may read his written soul!” (II. i. 108-10).

Shortly after, both Panthea and Asia valorise communicative modes beyond verbal articulation, the former in her vision of “O FOLLOW, FOLLOW!” which is “stamped” on “each leaf” of the “blossoms ... blown down” (II. i. 138-41),<sup>78</sup> and the latter in her description of the same words “written” “on the shadows of the moving clouds / Athwart the purple mountain slope” (II. i. 151-53). The focus of Act Two, Scene One as it comes to a close is the half-heard, half-understood. The sounds of the Echoes are “fine” and “clear” (II. i. 165), the “liquid responses / Of ... aerial tongues” (II. i. 171-72), which “recedeth” (II. i. 174) and become, the stage directions tell us, “more distant,” before “grow[ing] more faint / And distant” still (II. i. 188-89), their

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<sup>78</sup> The image, clearly evocative of the sibylline leaves of the ancient oracles, returns memorably in the opening to Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826).

“notes sink[ing] upon the ebbing wind” (II. i. 195), to be chased by the two Oceanides “ere the voices fade away” (II. i. 208).

The image of the fourth spirit in Act One sleeping “on a poet’s lips” and “dreaming ... / In the sound his breathing kept” has its echoes in the later acts, just as it has its precursor in the Phantasm of Jupiter asking “what unaccustomed sounds / Are hovering on my lips” (I. 242-43). In describing Prometheus to Asia, Panthea refers to the titan’s “passion-parted lips” (II. i. 74); later in the same speech she recalls Ione having “felt within [Panthea’s] parted lips / The sweet air that sustained [Ione]” (II. i. 103-04). Writing from Bologna during the composition of Act One and a few weeks before beginning Act Two, Shelley relates to Peacock a painting of ‘Christ Beatified’ by Correggio the poet had seen in which “the whole figure seems dilated with expression, ... the lips parted but scarcely parted with the breath of intense but regulated passions.”<sup>79</sup> The image of unformed or half-formed utterance, of lips on the cusp of communication, of breath and of breathing, is an appropriate visual representation for the boundary-space between the formed and unformed, the articulated and unarticulated, to which Shelley seeks recourse with some regularity in the lyrical drama.

The “wild-eyed charioteer[s]” of the “cars drawn by rainbow winged steeds” are said to “drink / With eager lips the wind of their own speed” (II. vi. 130-36); Act Two Scene Five opens with Asia telling this Spirit of the Hour that “thou breathest on their nostrils, but my breath / Would give them swifter speed” (II. v. 6-7); the voice of the “sounds i’ the air which speak the love / Of all articulate beings” (II. v. 35-36) sings

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<sup>79</sup> 9 November 1818, *LPBS*, vol. ii, 49-50.

“Life of Life! Thy lips enkindle / With their love the breath between them” (II. v. 48-49); and Asia speaks of “realms where the air we breathe is Love” (II. v. 95). In Act Three, Prometheus asks the Spirit of the Hour to “breathe into the many-folded shell, / Loosening its mighty music” (III. iii. 80-81); the Earth responds to Prometheus with “I hear, I feel; / Thy lips are on me, and their touch runs down / Even to the adamantine central gloom / Along these marble nerves” (III. iii. 84-87). When Asia asks Earth the nature of death she places “breathe” alongside “love,” “move” and “speak” as the characteristics of life (III. iii. 108-110) just as the Spirit of the Hour places “to breathe” alongside “to move” and “to be” as characteristics of life (III. i. 126) and goes on to speak of the “common, false, cold, hollow talk / Which makes the heart deny the *yes* it breathes” (III. 149-50), characterising conventional utterance as false, in contrast with breath as the heart’s truth. In Act Four “Breath” stands alongside “Love” and “Thought” as the triumvirate which form, the Chorus of Spirits tells us, “the powers that quell Death” (IV. 150-51), before describing how their “singing shall build / In the void’s loose field” as they go about their “work” which “shall be called the Promethean” (IV. 153-58). As the lyrical drama moves towards its close, in putting into words the at once astronomical and sexual “cover[ing]” of the moon by the earth, the Moon evokes the image of “the soft and sweet eclipse / When soul meets soul on lovers’ lips” (IV. 450-56).

Images of breathing and of lips hovering between the voiced and the voiceless function effectively as the centre of a nexus of association and relation within the lyrical drama because the images themselves hover between being and not-being. They denote the possibility of utterance – that is to say, they move beyond the entirely unarticulated and unformed – but they stop short of full utterance, of being too formed, of reaching

over into the fixed state of imperfect communication through language. They are a framed absence, a paradoxically centreless centre which we will see depicted in different forms in the next chapter in Byron's English cantos. For both Byron and Shelley, these forms of framed absences meet, or partially meet, the needs of poets positioning their creating between the unformed and the too-formed text.

## V

The particular images used by Shelley as he positions his poetic making are also valuable in that, in seeking the appropriate expressive mode for his vision, they inhabit a space which is, or can be shaped by the poet into being, at once anatomical, linguistic, psychic and topographical. As Geoffrey Matthews has carefully and compellingly explored, Shelley's descriptions of environment in the lyrical drama often marry the symbolic with close attention to topographical accuracy, and in doing so offer resistance to the "perilous tendency towards dualism" Matthews notes exists in Shelleyan criticism in this regard.<sup>80</sup> The geophysical and the metaphysical form another powerful relation in *Prometheus Unbound*, with images of exhalation and breathing, drawing on Shelley's knowledge of contemporary science, forming a point of contact in their poetic figuration: as Wasserman notes, "the picture created by [contemporary] science and adopted by Shelley in his drama is of a world repeatedly breathing out dew, vapor, mist, clouds, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions."<sup>81</sup> In describing the "Cavern" where the spirit of the Earth "was panted forth in anguish," Earth speaks of the "oracular" consequences of "mad[ness]" caused by its "breath" which "now rises, as among tall weeds / A violet's exhalation, and it fills / With a

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<sup>80</sup> G. M. Matthews, "A Volcano's Voice in Shelley," 550-68, 550.

<sup>81</sup> Wasserman, 329.



serener light and crimson air / ... the rocks and woods around" (III. iii. 124-34). As with many of Shelley's poetic evocations of environment, Shelley's description shows a strong grasp upon the actuality of early nineteenth-century scientific thinking<sup>82</sup> – in this case regarding vulcanism and geophysics – and offers itself as a figurative representation of the burgeoning possibilities of "irrepressible collective energy contained by repressive power."<sup>83</sup> The "breathing earth" (II. ii. 52), as the Semichorus of Spirits calls it, forms part of the change depicted in the lyrical drama, its "meteorological figuration"<sup>84</sup> involved in an utterance of the truth hovering on the edge of articulation.

In the final act Shelley's interrelations and separations reach their dazzling and audacious apotheosis, heralded by the "new notes" of the "awful sound" of the "deep music of the rolling world, / Kindling within the strings of the waved air / Aeolian modulations," its "pause[s] ... filled with under-notes, / Clear, silver, icy, keen, awakening tones, / Which pierce the sense, and live within the soul" (IV. 185-91). The "two visions of strange radiance" which "float upon / The ocean-like enchantment of strong sound, / Which flows intenser, keener, deeper" (IV. 202-03) are depicted through images which evoke Shelleyan interrelation and the boundary-spaces of articulation respectively. The first, the "chariot" is described using the recurring Shelleyan simile noted at the end of Chapter Four: "that thinnest boat / In which the Mother of the Months is borne / By ebbing light into the Western cave / When she upsprings from interlunar dreams" (IV. 206-09) is another incarnation of "a

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<sup>82</sup> In addition to Geoffrey Matthews, Alan Bewell has also demonstrated Shelley's adherence to the scientific thinking of his day in his writing and how it is often used as a vehicle for expressing the possibilities of revolution. Alan Bewell, "Percy Bysshe Shelley and Revolutionary Climatology," *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 209-19.

<sup>83</sup> Matthews, "A Volcano's Voice in Shelley," *SPP*, 563.

<sup>84</sup> Keach, 138.

phenomenon that haunts Shelley's poetry,"<sup>85</sup> the image of the "new Moon, with the old Moon in her arms" which operates so effectively as a symbol of the Shelleyan capacity for objects to be at once subsumed into one another and discrete. The second, the "sphere, which is as many thousand spheres" (IV. 238) with its "inter-transpicuous" and "unimaginable shapes" (IV. 244-46) has a memorable image at its centre, one which Bloom suggests "suddenly lifts the passage from brilliance to greatness":<sup>86</sup>

Within the Orb itself,  
 Pillowed upon its alabaster arms,  
 Like to a child o'erwearied with sweet toil,  
 On its own folded wings and wavy hair,  
 The Spirit of the Earth is laid asleep  
 (IV. 261-65)

The image, striking in the tender stillness of its description within the whirligig of complex interactions, and perhaps influenced by the recent death of William Shelley, operates stylistically as a measured, controlled centre. The lines which precede it move from the enjambed speed of the "thousand motions / Upon a thousand sightless axles spinning" to the braking effect of "intensely, slowly, solemnly roll on" (IV. 247-48): as William Keach notes, the "force of self-destroying swiftness" demonstrates its self-destroying nature by being "realized rhythmically and syntactically"<sup>87</sup> as "rapid motion converts itself into suspension and stillness."<sup>88</sup> The brakes, once applied, allow a slowing of the "intense yet self-conflicting speed" (IV. 259) as it gives way to the

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<sup>85</sup> Bloom, 141.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>87</sup> Keach, 170.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

end-stopped, caesura-free centre-point, the eye of the storm of activity. The image includes a further detail:

And you can see its little lips are moving  
Amid the changing light of their own smiles,  
Like one who talks of what he loves to dream.  
*Ione.* 'Tis only mocking the Orb's harmony ...  
(IV. 265-69)

At the centre of one of Shelley's most complex depictions of interrelation we have the image of lips between articulation and non-articulation. It is that which exists on the verge of articulation which forms the centre-point to Shelley's vision: imperfect apprehension is its own form of centre, with *Ione's* one-line interjection – hailed by Bloom as “a very great line indeed”<sup>89</sup> – emphasising even further that what is being valorised is a framed absence which reaches towards but is at least at one remove from the “harmony” itself, and that its nature as such is a source of and cause for, rather than a hindrance to, that valorisation. As Stuart Sperry notes of the final two acts of the lyrical drama, Shelley's poetic ambition was such that he “reache[s] that point ... where the visionary imagination outruns the means for its expression.”<sup>90</sup> Under such circumstances, he provides an emblem of the visionary imagination in which that very outrunning of the means of expression is inhered. Like the seeming contradictions of a “Heaven” which is “unascended” and “pinnacled dim” (III. iv. 203-04), it is not harmony but its pointed-up representation, and not articulation but a gesturing towards articulation's possibility, which occupies the centre space of the image. As noted in the introduction, Leavis, describing Shelley as “peculiarly emotional,” suggests that

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<sup>89</sup> Bloom, 145.

<sup>90</sup> Sperry, 108.

the reader or critic seeking to “define this sense” ultimately “find[s] [them]selves invoking an absence of something.”<sup>91</sup> In doing so, it seems to me that Leavis fails to engage with the ways in which the confusions of Shelley’s own invocations of the possibilities of absence are central to his poetic achievement.

As O’Neill notes of the conclusion to the lyrical drama: “though Demogorgan’s coda situates itself beyond self-questioning, it stresses the need for constant re-creation of reality.”<sup>92</sup> The drama’s end-point is in fact a position of continual process; whilst “the poetry strives to end up with a glimpse of language as unfrail spell, talismanic charm,” Shelley’s lyrical drama “is memorable precisely because the fear that its words may ‘pass away’ has, throughout, prompted the inventiveness of its language.”<sup>93</sup> One of the many paradoxes of the poem is the way in which its success lies in its engagement with its own necessary failures, and in terms of the use of language Shelley recognises, as Weisman notes, that “communication must rely on the revelation of its inexorable ellipses.”<sup>94</sup> The simultaneous similarity and dissimilitude in the relation between articulation’s forms and the attempted communication is, in *Prometheus Unbound*, pressed into the service of evocation of the poem’s myriad other relational similarities and dissimilarities: between what is hoped for and reality; between Shelley and his literary predecessors; between Prometheus and Jupiter; between the natural world and processes of social and psychic change; and between phenomenal and noumenal realities – the latter’s subsumation into and slow replacement of the former being a key element of Act Two, evoked intermittently from the second half of Asia’s opening speech (II. I, 17-27) onwards. What is reached for throughout the lyrical drama’s last

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<sup>91</sup> *Revaluation*, 173.

<sup>92</sup> O’Neill, 125.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>94</sup> Weisman, *Imageless Truths*, 87.

three acts is communicative modes and positions which operate in fragile but vital space between non-articulation and fixed articulation, existing “on [the] poet’s lips,” and, having been reached for, such modes and positions offer themselves as representations of, corollaries of, or facets of, other forms of relation within the lyrical drama, which holds its relation with relation itself at its core.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### “Something Which Was Nothing”:

#### Articulation and Silence in *Don Juan*’s English Cantos

##### I

With its self-referential propensities and its regular attendance to the affordances and constraints of text-making, *Don Juan* both addresses and performatively enacts poetry’s self-consuming nature. As his poem develops, Byron’s attempts to express the machinations of society present him with particular challenges, such that, in searching for sincerity and substance amidst the dangers of system and cant, his text must – explicitly or implicitly, directly or obliquely – run the risk of its own annihilation, as it explores an argument concomitant with its own meaninglessness. It is in the English cantos that these tensions are most strikingly and profoundly played out.

In Chapter Five I explored how Byron, in cantos VII to X, met the challenges inherent in representation through drawing to the fore a self-conscious attendance to the complexities of text-making, and how, as he turns his attention to his homeland, he finds such challenges less readily resolvable. I would like to contend that the poet’s affecting exploration of his own ambivalence towards English society and its mores provides a crucible in which mobility’s capacity to stave off calcification is examined anew. It is my view that this re-examination of mobility by Byron precipitates a notable shift in the means by which he seeks to address and explore the challenges inherent in articulation and representation; by elucidating this I hope to offer a new perspective on the poem’s intriguing final cantos.

My argument is, broadly speaking, as follows. In spite of – indeed, perhaps because of – Byron’s resolve to accurately represent English society, it is a world which he struggles to represent. Mobility and change have turned against him, transmuted into forces of stagnation and enervation. Having once again explored his concern with issues of representation through the motifs employed in the middle cantos, he has found these to have fallen short in his desire to convey the complex nature of both the world within the poem (English society) and the world of the poem (the losses, the opened gaps, the very falling-short itself inherent in any mode of articulation, including poetry; including this poem). In seeking another route in his exploration of both these worlds, his narrative is pressed into the service of his metanarrative explorations, becoming an allegorising of the shortcomings of representation and of articulation. And after more than sixteen cantos of his great epic, the rest is silence.

## II

Faced with a subject matter whose satisfactory representation is proving elusive, Byron initially lines up previously-employed angles of approach. He returns, for example, to the satirising of false nomenclature, Juan’s initial journey through London taking him:

Through Groves, so called as being void of trees,  
 (Like *lucus* from *no* light); through prospects named  
 Mount Pleasant, as containing nought to please,  
 Nor much to climb; ...

...  
 Through ‘Rows’ most modestly called ‘Paradise,’  
 Which Eve might quit without much sacrifice;—

(XI. 21: 161-68)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical canto, stanza and line numbers in this chapter refer to *Don Juan*, unless stated otherwise.

Similarly, Juan spends “the twilight hour / In riding round those vegetable puncheons / Called ‘Parks,’ where there is neither fruit nor flower / Enough to gratify a bee’s slight munchings” (XI. 66: 521-25); later, Byron writes of “four Honourable Misters, whose / Honour was more before their names than after” (XIII. 86: 681-82), and notes that “professions ... are no more to be found / Professional” (XIII, 95: 755-56). False naming is as much a part of the London Byron depicts in these cantos as it is part of the wars he depicts in the middle cantos – indeed, “Grove” is present as a misnomer in both: here a treeless place; in the middle cantos a man named “Grose” – and his lines also recall his comments in the addition to the Preface to the first two cantos of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* regarding the knightliness or otherwise of knights of the past.

Another point of focus present in both parts of his epic is the proliferation of texts and stylised modes of articulation within the text: where in the middle cantos we had the bulletins, the gazettes, the tea-hour tales, the words upon a tomb, and so on, here we have Juan’s consciously elevated eulogising of London which is bathetically “interrupted by a knife” (XI. 10: 79); the Cockney sociolect of that knife’s late owner (XI. 16-19: 121-152); the “Guide-book” (XI. 23: 182); the “names in brass” which are “[en]blazon[ed] o’er the door” in “some conspicuous square” (XI. 31: 247-48); the “common-place book” in which Juan’s “sayings” are “set down” by “Miss Araminta Smith,” who “translated ‘Hercules Furens’ / Into as furious English” (XI. 52: 413-16); another “common-place book,” this time belonging to “Kit-Cat, the famous Conversationalist” (XIII. 97: 772-73); the “pages of the last Review” with which the



“interior of [the] heads or bonnets” of the Bluestockings are “line[d]” (XI. 50: 394-95); “Homer’s ‘Catalogue of ships’” (XIII. 74: 590); the “Orator” with his “very set / Smooth speech” (XIII. 90: 714-16); “Strongbow” and “Longbow,” the “two wits” with differing styles (XIII. 92-3: 729-44); the “paragraph in every paper,” including the “*Morning Post*,” proclaiming the Amundevilles’ “departure, for [their] country seat” (XIII. 51: 401; 406-07); the newspapers presenting details of dinners “as thus: On Thursday there was a grand dinner; / Present, Lords A. B. C.” (XIII. 54: 425-26); the description of the “She epistle” which “never ends” (XIII. 105: 834-35); “Don Quixote in the original” (XIV. 98: 778); the matchmaker “arranging” her unmarried relatives “like books on the same shelf” (XV. 31: 243); the “drama of the marriage unities / Observed as strictly ... / As those of Aristotle” (XV. 32: 252-54); “Rumour” described as “that live gazette” (XV. 11: 81-82); canto XVI’s “Black Friar” song (XV. “Black Friar” 1-6: 321-368); the “nomenclature” of “cookery” (XV. 69: 550-51) found in the “best of dictionaries / Which encyclopedize both fish and fowl” (XV. 68: 541-42); the “old newspaper” Juan finds “right easy to peruse” (XVI. 26: 205-06); Fitz-Fulke’s reading of the “‘Bath Guide,’ / And ‘Hayley’s Triumphs’” (XVI. 50: 442-43); the dinner guests who “broke / Forth into universal epigram” (XVI. 104: 873-74); and Juan calming himself by “read[ing] an article the king attacking, / And a long eulogy of ‘Patent Blacking’” (XVI. 26: 207-08). The existence of multiple texts within the text of Byron’s poem serves in both the middle and later cantos to point up his concern with constructedness, metonyms for his own text as a construct with no straightforward claims on the truth.

The initial strategies, then, are broadly the same: what differs is their efficacy. As we have seen, the complexities and imperfections of representation are by no means

necessarily deleterious to a text's vitality: indeed, it is a key contention of this study that such complexities often possess an energising capacity, even if that energy draws in part from the very threat of calcification and enervation posed by poetic articulation. For both poets, this has always been a delicate compact, its power lying in the sensitivity of the balance. As Byron begins these final cantos his great friend Shelley and great foe Castlereagh have been lost in the space of two months, and the balance seems to be tipping.

In the middle cantos Byron's frustration with others' false and imperfect representations energises his text, whereas in the English cantos the mobile energy of his poetic making seems to be running down in the face of twin, related challenges. The first of these is his frustration with his inability to accurately represent his subject; the second is his feeling that, *were* he to accurately represent it, it would be a picture of a paradoxically mobile stagnation, change operating as listless continuation.

With regard to the first of these challenges, in the Preface to his own play *Philip Van Artevelde* Henry Taylor writes:

... when at last [Byron] became conscious that a theme was wanting, it was at a period of life when no man will consent to put himself to school; he could change his style and manner, but he could not change his moral and intellectual being, nor extend the sphere of his contemplations to subjects which were alien in *spirit* from those with which he had been hitherto, whether in life or in literature, exclusively conversant: in short, his mind was past the period of growth; ... and he turned his genius loose to rove over the surface of society, content with such light observations upon life and manners as any acute man of the world might collect upon his travels, and conscious that he could recommend them to attention by such wit, brilliancy, dexterity of phrase, and versatility of fancy, as no one but himself could command.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *BCH*, 325-29, 327.

Whilst this thesis argues against the idea that Byron's earlier poems are the product of "uninformed energy," Taylor's words are valuable in that they capture well a sense that what has worked before for Byron works no longer, or at least not with the same efficacy or effect. Taylor is right, too, in suggesting that the later cantos of *Don Juan* express on one level a difficulty in "extend[ing] the sphere of his contemplations" in the face of poetic challenges. However, what we sense is not the poet's "content" but his discontent, deriving not from his subjects being "alien ... from those which he had been hitherto ... conversant" so much as from his subjects' familiarity: despite his exile, the poet and his audiences alike would have felt that English society was a subject well-suited to his satirical pen, and one which poet and audience would relish. Byron's response is, I think, more audacious than it seems, and what the cantos demonstrate is that very extension of a sphere of contemplation as he seeks solutions to the difficulties of representation he encounters.

The second challenge facing Byron lies in the nature of the society he seeks to depict. Looking back nearly a decade after Byron's death, Edward Bulwer-Lytton offers the often-made suggestion that Byron's poetic sensibility exemplified the spirit of the age. It is a spirit he describes as:

... that hollowness and glitter which belong to the occupations of the great world, and that fretfulness and pride, that uneasy and dissatisfied temper, which are engendered by a variety of small social distinctions, and the eternal *vying*, and consequent mortification, which those distinctions produce. These feelings, the slow growth of centuries, became more and more developed as the effects of civilization and wealth rendered the aristocratic influences more general upon the subordinate classes. In the indolent luxuries of a court, what

more natural than satiety among the great, and a proud discontent among their emulators?<sup>3</sup>

In the wheels within wheels of English society, Byron has encountered that which is ever anathema to him – a system. Its changes are systematic, the lifelessness of its “smooth monotony” (XIV. 16: 127) systemic, and if members do intermittently, “like soldiers off parade,” choose to “leave the drill,” the “roll-call draws them back afraid” (XIV. 17: 129-31). The machine well-oiled simply renders it more indubitably a machine. As Michael O’Neill notes, “for all Byron’s sense of the mutable, he captures a world tending towards conservative self-perpetuation.”<sup>4</sup> Brewer suggests, rightly, that “in a number of their works Shelley and Byron envision a universe that is ever-changing, punctuated by events that are as revolutionary as they are sudden.”<sup>5</sup> In the case of English society, the connection between change and revolution has not just become uncoupled but inverted, change a reactionary rather than revolutionary force, such that, fundamentally, it is not change at all. As Byron says of himself in the final stanzas of the poem, English society is “changeable ... yet somehow ‘*Idem semper*’” (XVII. 11: 83).

We have seen how Byron’s redoubled efforts to present the world have often shifted into a meditation on his inability to do so, and now we find – Byron finds – that the old methods of making an energising virtue of the trials of representation, the old recourse to a self-conscious attendance to text-making’s imperfections, and even

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 1833, *BCH*, 317-18, 318.

<sup>4</sup> Michael O’Neill, “‘A Wilderness of the Most Rare Conceits’: Imagining Politics in the English cantos of Byron’s *Don Juan*,” *Byron: The Poetry of Politics and the Politics of Poetry*, ed. Roderick Beaton and Christine Kenyon Jones (London: Routledge, 2017), 144-56, 149.

<sup>5</sup> *The Shelley-Byron Conversation*, 36.

recourse to change itself, have been found wanting. This situation does, I think, shape these last cantos more profoundly than we might at first recognise, to the extent that the text's wider narrative is co-opted into the exploration of this creative impasse. When Hazlitt writes pejoratively of *Don Juan* that "it is ... a poem written about itself" he suggests that "this censure applies to the first cantos of *Don Juan* much more than to the last"; however, it seems to me that his comment applies to the English cantos more than Hazlitt realises, and in ways he did not intend.<sup>6</sup> Byron's appropriation of the formed text into the struggles of its textual formation has its own propulsive energy, however paradoxical, such that the processes of Byron's response to potential failure become a form of successfulness. As such, whilst I would hesitate to agree with Samuel Egerton Bridges' suggestion that "his [Byron's] powers grew to the last: the last two cantos of *Don Juan* (XV, XVI) were perhaps the best written of any of that poem,"<sup>7</sup> the poet's engagement in the English cantos with his perceived shortcomings is not *de facto* a comment upon the cantos' quality. What *can* be said, though, is that Byron's ameliorative action in the face of articulation's imperfections has undergone a change: from co-opting language into imperfectly denying its own immobility (as I explored in Chapters One and Three) to co-opting it into acknowledging and exploring that propensity for immobility (as I explored in Chapter Five). In these English cantos, Byron's imaginative trajectory is, fundamentally – for all the poet's journeying, for all his endless leaving – a movement steeped in processes of return.

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<sup>6</sup> William Hazlitt, "Lord Byron," *The Spirit of the Age*, 1825. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. xi, 69-78, 76.

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Egerton Bridges, *Letters on the Character and Poetical Genius of Lord Byron* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824), 283.

### III

Representations of the female; a retreat from articulation; depictions of ruin; a reconjuring of Newstead; the framing of space: these are the interrelated forms in which Byron's return to origin are realised. The first of these is found in his immediate response to finding that in fact "there's little to describe" (XIV. 20: 160) and that "what I throw off is ideal" (XIV. 22: 169): his summative lament, "Alas! Worlds fall" leads us to "—and woman, since she fell'd / The world ... / Has not yet given up the practice quite" (XIV. 23: 177-78; 180), which in turn begets a six-stanza rumination (XIV. 25-30: 193-240) on the "she condition" (XIV. 24: 188) and the trials of womankind, "poor thing of usages!" (XIV. 23: 181). Naturally his sympathy is imbued with a Byronic wink as he compares "parturition" with the "daily plague" of shaving (XIV. 23-24: 84-86) and he is soon himself exploring the "usage" of "a petticoat and peeping ankle" as "a cure for grief" (XIV. 27: 215-16):

And when upon a silent, sullen day,  
With a sirocco, for example, blowing,  
When even the sea looks dim with all its spray,  
And sulkily the river's ripple's flowing,  
And the sky shows that very ancient gray,  
The sober, sad antithesis to glowing,—  
'T is pleasant, if then anything is pleasant,  
To catch a glimpse even of a pretty peasant.  
(XIV. 28: 217-24)

We have seen the regularity with which elements and objects are imbued with motion through the kind of language employed here, but now the "spray" is rendered "dim," the adverb "sulkily" enervates the "flowing" of the "river's ripple," and most notably, the sky is "the sober, sad antithesis to glowing." These tropes are now pressed into the service of enervation, and in this state "if ... anything is pleasant," it is female beauty.

For Byron “the ocean woman” (XIII. 40: 314) is as central a subject of exploration in these cantos as the ocean itself was in *Childe Harold*. Conceptually, the unarticulated and return are allied, constitutive of a move from dissolution to re-solution, and one function of the representation of women in these cantos is as an associative nexus within which and in relation to which concepts of return and the unarticulated are explored and expressed.

The women of the English cantos are often not only associated with linguistic imperfection but are presented as imperfect texts themselves: as embodiments of erroneous transmission. The first named women in the English cantos are the Bluestockings. This “jury of Matrons,” by whom Juan is “examined” (XI. 51: 403-04), both transmute Juan’s words into a text (Araminta Smith “set[ting] down his sayings in her common-place book” (XI. 52: 416)) and point up his words’ imperfections (they “regretted that he did not rhyme,” and “Lady Fitz-Frisky, and Miss Maeva Mannish, / Both long’d extremely to be sung in Spanish” (XI. 53: 420; 423-24)). They themselves demonstrate imperfect articulation (“they talked bad French of Spanish” (XI. 50: 397)); text and character are innovatively intermingled (they “with the pages of the last Review / Line the interior of their heads or bonnets” (XI. 50: 397)); and their affectations – that is to say, the extent to which their representation differs from their true selves – are pointed up (when Araminta Smith sets down Juan’s sayings, she does so “with her best look” (XI. 52: 415)).

Lady Pinchbeck, the next female we meet, serves as a further example of a tendency evident in *Childe Harold* as well as *Don Juan* and expressed already in Byron’s

reiterated abortive attempts to “begin [his] poem” (XII. 54: 425), his frustration that “change grows too changeable, without being new” (XI. 82: 654), and the murder of “poor Tom” (XI. 17: 133) as a moral counterbalancing to the rescue of Leila: in his attempts to move on, to endlessly press forward, to find renewal, Byron finds himself at the place of his beginning, his journeying a circumnavigation, his change not change at all. Announcing that “now I’m going to be immoral; now / I mean to show things really as they are, / Not as they ought to be” (XII. 40: 313-15), he states “but first of little Leila we’ll dispose” XII. 41: 321): “like a day-dawn ... young and pure” (XII. 41: 322) she is clearly not fit for the intended explosive exposé, but in this peremptory dismissal as a means of starting anew what is striking is that, a dozen cantos in, we are back where we began, with a young charge assigned a tutor, Lady Pinchbeck thus functioning as an anodyne Julia.<sup>8</sup> “Change ... without being new”: in enacting his forward drive, Byron echoes where he began.

The first of the three main female figures of the English cantos to be described is Lady Adeline Amundeville.<sup>9</sup> Her introduction involves an immediate digression on her “old Norman name” (XIII. 2: 10), part of a general attentiveness to nomenclature which is characteristic of these cantos, and a subject to which he returns early in canto XV:

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<sup>8</sup> In his review of Thomas Moore’s biographical work on Byron, Thomas Macaulay argues that “it is hardly too much to say, that Lord Byron could exhibit only one man and only one woman”; that his “women, like his men, are all of one breed. Haidee is a half-savage and girlish Julia; Julia is a civilised and matronly Haidee,” *BCH*, 295-316, 311. This seems both too sweeping and too uncomplicatedly pejorative. In the instance of Lady Pinchbeck and Julia, it would be more accurate to suggest that similarity in narrative function serves a valuable tonal effect.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Graham, whose “own inclination is to see William and Lady Caroline Lamb as the principle sources of the Amundevilles,” makes the observation that “not even Don Juan, over the whole course of the poem, receives much more analytical attention than is devoted to Lady Adeline,” Graham, 182-83.



The Lady Adeline Amundeville  
 A pretty name as one would wish to read,  
 Must perch harmonious on my tuneful quill.  
 There's music in the sighing of a reed;  
 There's music in the gushing of a rill;  
 There's music in all things, if men had ears:  
 Their earth is but an echo of the spheres.

(XV. 5: 33-40)

The awareness of the “pretty name as one would wish to read” – as if Byron is looking at the words on his page; as if seeing them anew – takes the stanza in an unusual direction, first engaging with the word *as* a word, and therefore its constructedness, and as a consequence moving backwards through less codified forms of communication. It reverses the movement described by Blake in his “Introduction” to the *Songs of Innocence*:<sup>10</sup> the speaker “piping” an unspecified tune “down the valleys wild” (1) is urged to “pipe a song” (5) on a specific subject, then “drop thy pipe” (9) and “sing thy songs” (10), and then to “sit ... down and write / In a book, that all may read” (13-14). The piper follows the instructed movement towards more codified articulation, “pluck[ing] a hollow reed” (16), “ma[king] a rural pen” (17) and “stain[ing] the water clear” (18). Blake’s nod to the mechanics of his own artistic practices notwithstanding, this last phrase holds within its ambiguities much of Byron and Shelley’s equivocal attitude to poetic making and the gains and losses of articulation. The retreat from the codified utterance of Adeline’s “pretty name” into prelinguistic forms inverts the movement depicted by Blake and expresses Byron’s doubt regarding what language and poetic making may offer, and whether articulation might obfuscate rather than illuminate, falsify rather than clarify.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> William Blake, “Introduction,” *Songs of Innocence. The Complete Works of William Blake*, 55.

<sup>11</sup> Though I feel this reversal to be illuminating to Byron’s attitude to poetic making in these cantos, I do not suggest that this is a conscious repudiation of Blake’s specific poem: Byron never knew of Blake.

In this context it is apt that Adeline is first associated with the Amundevilles' mansion in "Blank-Blank Square," a term repeated thrice in short succession (XIII. 25; 28: 193; 200; 217). The appellation forms, ironically but importantly, a powerful and multivalent signifier: it operates as representation of Byron's at least temporary abandonment of his creed of no-holds-barred honesty; in his digression on the subject and the way the term book-ends stanza twenty-five it is self-consciously pointed-up, thus complicating our assessment of that abandonment; and it offers a comment upon literary and social convention. In its very possession of such potent and multivalent economy it is neatly synecdochical of that communicatory mode towards which Byron is moving. As with elements within *Prometheus Unbound* in the previous chapter, we have here the unarticulated articulated, the linguistic framing of an absence of utterance, and as such, its proliferation of signification is, as it were, significant.

The ambivalence and equivocation we see in Byron's depiction of Adeline is borne of the greater, more profound ambivalences with which Byron is beset in the writing of these cantos: in her character he appears to construct for himself at once an avatar of English society and, as Michael O'Neill suggests, "Byron's own alter ego,"<sup>12</sup> each personified in the one figure so that they might be more easily examined, and it is difficult not to be left with the suspicion that he is genuinely disconcerted by what he finds. She is introduced as:

... high-born, wealthy by her father's will,  
And beauteous, even where beauties most abound,  
In Britain—which of course true patriots find  
The goodliest soil of Body and of Mind.

(XIII. 2: 13-16)

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<sup>12</sup> Michael O'Neill, "'A Wilderness of the Most Rare Conceits': Imagining Politics in the English Cantos of Byron's *Don Juan*," *Byron: The Poetry of Politics and the Politics of Poetry*, 152.

The wry implied bias he allows the final couplet to hold is expanded upon in the next stanza, which by turns gives way to a discussion of the “indifference” which “begins to lull / Our passions” once we turn “that awkward corner” of thirty, at which point “we walk in Wisdom’s ways” (XIII. 4: 26; 29-30), having “passed life’s equinoctial line” (XIII. 5: 36). This last metaphor, a favourite of Byron’s and one applied to both the Gothic scene in canto X (X. 61: 486) and Adeline herself (XIII. 34: 267), here suggests the very thing which we have felt played out in the English cantos: that both Byron and English society are not quite what they once were, and, like those thirtysomethings turning to “their claret and Madeira” (XIII. 5: 37), Byron’s various poetic strategies are failing attempts within his poem “to irrigate the dryness of decline” (XIII. 5: 38).

Byron writes as one who is attempting to express Adeline’s individuality and substance but doubts it too. She has “high spirit, / Which judged mankind in their due estimation” (XIII. 31: 244-45); it is said that “coquetry, she disdained to wear” (XIII. 31: 246), as “secure of admiration, its impression / Was faint, as of an every-day possession” (XIII. 31: 247-48) and “to all she was polite without parade” (XIII. 32: 249). Is this the depiction of a surface calm suggestive of substance impervious to the whimsy of affectation, or a surface calm which is itself affectation, a retreat from vitality – from selfhood – sacrificed on the altar of social propriety? I wonder if Byron himself is entirely sure. He adds that Adeline possessed “that calm Patrician polish in the address, / Which ne’er can pass the equinoctial line / Of any thing which Nature can express” (XIII. 34: 266-68), before countering this by clarifying that despite her

surface appearance she “was not indifferent” (XIII. 36: 281), that “the chilliest aspects may centre / A hidden nectar under a cold presence” (XIII. 38: 298-99), and yet in doing so he draws attention to his construction of metaphor, first depicting her as “a Volcano” which “beneath the snow / ... holds the lava more / Within—*et caetera*” (XIII. 36: 282-84); then, having rejected this as “a common-place” and “a tired metaphor” (XIII. 36. 282; 285), comes up with “another figure in a trice” and tries to run with the conceit of “a bottle of champagne” distilled to “a liquid glassful” (XIII. 37: 289-90; 294). Initially concluding that “your cold people are beyond all price, / When once you have broken their confounded ice” (XIII. 38: 303-04), he diverts and digresses himself towards stating “the world upon the whole is worth the assertion / (If but for comfort) that all things are kind” (XIII. 41: 323-25).

Self-acknowledged assertion in the face of doubt: assertion because to think otherwise would be difficult. For all his pugnacious sleeve-rolling in anticipation of applying his barbs to English society, perhaps Byron is, in his exploration, a little destabilised upon contemplating the possibility that, when it comes to an individual or a society, there “*may*” (my italics) be “a hidden nectar under a cold presence,” and “cold people” may be “beyond all price,” but there is also the possibility that such hidden depths may not exist – that they may in fact have, as it were, hidden shallows. Once again in these cantos, the stakes are high: if Adeline is synecdochical of English society and representative of both Byron and his poetic making, then if Byron sees, or half-sees, in Adeline a constructedness, a kind of false articulation of verity, then this implicates the very process of poetic making, including his own epic.

It is a subject to which he returns with equal equivocation in canto XVI, in which we are told that Adeline is “occupied by fame” (XVI. 95: 801). We are also told that when Juan “cast a glance / On Adeline while playing her grand role, / Which she went through as though it were a dance, / Betraying only now and then her soul,” he “began to feel / Some doubt how much of Adeline was *real*” (XVI. 96: 810-16). Yet having allowed this ostensible indictment the emphasis of italics and the finality of a stanza’s close, his next stanza, linked by a semicolon, characteristically qualifies and complicates:

So well she acted, all and every part  
 By turns—with that vivacious versatility,  
 Which many people take for want of heart.  
 They err—’tis merely what is called mobility,  
 A thing of temperament and not of art,  
 Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;  
 And false—though true; for surely they’re sincerest,  
 Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest.  
(XVI. 97: 817-24)

Adding to the ambiguities of the stanza is Byron’s note on the word “mobility,” which, he says, “may be defined as an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions—at the same time without *losing* the past.”<sup>13</sup> Byron tentatively half-accords Adeline both substance and truth by dint of her very possession of neither in and of herself: on one reading, she more profoundly *is* because she is not, that is to say she is, as Shelley says in the *Defence of Poetry*, “an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre”;<sup>14</sup> in the manner of poets, “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration”;<sup>15</sup> in

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<sup>13</sup> *BMW*, 1071.

<sup>14</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, *SMW*, 675.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 701.

the manner of Keats' negatively capable "Man of Achievement."<sup>16</sup> Byron's parting shot in his note on mobility – "[it] is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute"<sup>17</sup> – makes it clear that he sees this characteristic in himself, a productive cross to bear, with all its evident paradoxes.<sup>18</sup> Another reading, however, might be that Adeline is all falsity, all representation, all *text*,<sup>19</sup> and as such mirroring English society not just in the individual mirroring representations but in the very characteristic of embodying (*disembodying*?) nothing but representation.<sup>20</sup>

The stanza is one in which all is equivocal, and all may be otherwise: as with so many of Byron's lines they seem playfully serious and seriously playful. "Take for"; "want of"; "heart"; "merely"; "thing"; "temperament"; "art"; "though" (twice); "seeming"; "supposed"; "facility"; "false"; "true"; "surely"; "acted on"; even the destabilising "*may be defined*" (my italics) of the note: the stanza glitters because it is ever on the

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<sup>16</sup> "I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, ?27 December 1817, *KMW*, 370.

<sup>17</sup> *BMW*, 1071.

<sup>18</sup> Jerome McGann comments on these paradoxes: "*mobility* appears as a set of social graces, a capacity to charm and to be all things to all men, but it arises, apparently, from a ground of 'sincerity' in those kinds of people 'Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest.' Yet it *appears* the very height of insincerity and calculation. Which is it: 'a thing of' one's spontaneous 'temperament,' or of one's role-playing and 'art'? Is it 'false' or is it 'true'?" Jerome J. McGann, "Mobility and the Poetics of Historical Ventriloquism," *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Graham, who sees "the unworldly Aurora and the unabashed Fitz-Fulke, along with the English cantos' host of lesser women" as "personify[ing] aspects and qualities of the class and gender Adeline represents completely," is right to observe that "we are encouraged to think mythologically from the moment of Adeline's entrance into the poem," Graham, 186; 187. I would suggest, though, that "think[ing] mythologically" is a double-edged sword, the mythologised object at once greater than and lesser than real.

<sup>20</sup> It is accidental, I think, that Swinburne hits upon a key characteristic of Adeline's representation when he interrupts his sustained attack on Byron to suggest that "Lady Adeline promises better than any other study from the same hand." It is a back-handed form of praise, and clearly refers to the poem's incompleteness due to Byron's death ("what might have been made of [Adeline] in time we can but guess..."), but in fact Adeline does possess the very characteristic of *promise*, which holds within it both potential and the possibility that it will not be met. "Wordsworth and Byron," *Miscellanies*, 1886, 63-156. *BCH*, 474.

move, made at once more meaningful and less so in its resistance to fixed meaning, and as such mirrors the mirror Adeline, and English society, and Byron, and his epic, and poetry, and all articulation, on all of which, in Byron's work, the jury is ever out.

#### IV

Articulation temporarily (and, ironically, articulately) fails Byron in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, as he wishes to "embody and unbosom now / That which is most within" him into the "one word," but finds that he "cannot," and so "live[s] and die[s] unheard, / With a most voiceless thought" (*CHP* III. 97: 906-13). Then, his word of choice would have been "Lightning" (*CHP* III. 97: 911); he begins canto XV of *Don Juan* by proclaiming:

All present life is but an Interjection,  
An 'Oh! Or 'Ah!' of joy or misery,  
Or a 'Ha! ha!' or 'Bah!' — a yawn, or 'Pooh!'  
Of which perhaps the latter is most true.

(XV. I: 5-8)

Byron finds that linguistic complexity is as apt to breed obfuscation as much as clarity. Increasingly, he comes to see language as a medium of erroneous transmission. The penultimate line of the previous canto laments "were things but only call'd by their right name" (XIV. 102: 815), and faced with the failure of language, from canto XV onwards we see a movement away from articulation – into a framing of absences of communication which possess a paradoxically communicative quality, just as we saw with "Blank-Blank Square"; just as we saw in the first act of Shelley's own opus – and if the jury is ever out on Adeline as representative of English society's and poetry's false representations, then we have, too, a counterpart, arguably representative – again

with some qualification – of the verity of the unarticulated. Her introduction follows directly from a litany of archetypal aptonyms resonant of falsity, imperfection and stasis, such as “Miss Flaw, Miss Showman, ... Miss Knowman” (XV. 40: 316), and “Miss Millpond” (XV. 41: 321):<sup>21</sup>

A certain fair and fairy one,  
Of the best class, and better than her class,—  
Aurora Raby, a young star who shone  
O’er life, too sweet an image for such glass,  
A lovely being, scarcely form’d or moulded,  
A Rose with all its sweetest leaves yet folded.  
(XV. 43: 339-44)

“Being” is a potent word for Byron, its fixed status as noun in his hands ever influenced by its mobile potential as present continuous verb, and it is an apt one to describe Aurora who, we feel, is possessed of some of the mobile formlessness which Byron and Shelley both seek to hold loosely in their work – to invoke their younger contemporary again, she is Keats’ “immortal” (61) nightingale,<sup>22</sup> English society the “Cold Pastoral” (45) of his urn,<sup>23</sup> and in Byron’s depiction of her he throws into relief his depiction of English society. We, and Byron, see that in seeking verity of representation in relation to English society he has found that the object of study is itself a representation, textualised even before it reaches the poet’s pen. He has partially answered the question he asks at the start of canto XIV: he tacitly concedes the possibility that the reason “writers” find that “their sketches fail them” in their creation of “the *real* portrait of the highest tribe” (XIV. 20: 153; 159-60) is that not just the depiction but the thing depicted is now all “portrait,” the writer’s work

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<sup>21</sup> The last of these is no doubt another Byronic jibe at Annabella Milbanke.

<sup>22</sup> “Ode to a Nightingale,” *KMW*, 287.

<sup>23</sup> “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” *KMW*, 289.



rendered unintentionally and unavoidably ekphrastic as it represents “society, that china without flaw” (XII. 78: 621) where all is “polish’d, smooth and cold” as if “cut out of marble Attic” (XIII. 110: 874-75).

Aurora, in contrast, is “fairy” in part, “scarcely form’d or moulded,” defying fixed delineation: she is “all youth—but with an aspect beyond time” (XV. 45: 356). She is somehow separate from the world: “her aspect had an air so lonely” (XV. 44: 347), and she “gazed upon a world she scarcely knew, / As seeking not to know it; silent, lone, / As grows a flower, thus quietly she grew, / And kept her heart serene within its zone” (XV. 47: 369-72); Byron writes that “her spirit seemed as seated on a throne / Apart from the surrounding world, and strong / In its own strength” (XV. 47: 374-76). It is said that “the dashing and proud air of Adeline / Imposed not upon her” (XV. 56: 441-42), just as Juan’s “fame” was as “seals upon her wax” which “made no impression” (XV. 57: 449; 455-56).

Aurora Raby is characterised by a non-verbal communicativeness: she “with her large dark eyes / Surveyed him” (XVI. 31: 247-48); and “in her / There was a depth of feeling to embrace / Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space” (XVI. 48: 430-32). In a scene in which “the rest ... broke / Forth into universal epigram” (XVI. 104: 873-74) in praise at Adeline “dispens[ing] her airs and graces” (XVI. 100: 841), “there were but two exceptions to this keen / Skirmish of wits ...; one / Aurora, with her pure and placid mien; / And Juan” (XVI. 105: 881-84). Her silence, however, is a powerfully articulate and evocative one:

Aurora had renewed  
In him some feelings he had lately lost,

Or hardened; feelings which, perhaps ideal,  
Are so divine, that I must deem them real:—

The love of higher things and better days  
The unbounded hope, and heavenly ignorance  
Of what is called the world, and the world's ways:  
The moments when we gather from a glance  
More joy than from all future pride and praise.

(XVI. 107-8: 901-909)

The communicative power of the unarticulated is associated with Aurora, whose “intimations” not only “convey themselves physiologically”<sup>24</sup> but also, in their enigmatic expression, seem to go beyond even the fixity of paralinguistic tropes: Aurora’s response to Juan is “not [to] blush in turn, / Nor seem embarrassed—quite the contrary; / Her aspect was as usual, still—*not* stern— / And she withdrew, but cast not down, her eye” (XVI. 94: 793-96). Where Adeline is the screen upon which the falsities of English society are projected, Aurora Raby holds intimations of the ideal: she stands as a blank, simultaneously possessing an enigmatically communicative power whilst defying false representation into a fixed form. Thus, Byron is not so much contrasting the two characters in terms of one being more real than the other; rather, the contrast lies in the divergent way in which neither is entirely real, Byron exploiting the term’s double antonyms – Juan seeing Adeline as not real but part false, and seeing Aurora as not real but part ideal; thus Byron presents Juan as attempting to reconcile intimations of both as hovering between being real and their respective forms of unreality.

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<sup>24</sup> Michael O’Neill, “‘A Wilderness of the Most Rare Conceits’: Imagining Politics in the English Cantos of Byron’s *Don Juan*,” *Byron: The Poetry of Politics and the Politics of Poetry*, 149.

The triumvirate of the real, the ideal and the false is a key concern for Byron, bound up as it is with processes of poetic making: we have encountered it before, both in the reflexive operation of text-making in *Don Juan*'s middle cantos and in the exploration of phenomenal, noumenal and fictionalised conceptions of reality in the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. And, as ever, the fixed delineations between these elements will not hold in Byron's work, nor will the easy according of even putative primacy to one over the other. Both female figures play a role in the general shift towards silence and absence in these cantos, but whilst we might characterise Adeline as broadly representative of the potential falsity of representation and Aurora as broadly representative of the communicative power of the unarticulated, to claim unambiguous pejoration of one and valorisation of the other would be to misrepresent the work: what we see in these cantos is not the adoption of a position but rather a series of shifting stances.

Thus, the female characters may be representative, but what they are representative of is different interactions between the real world and something else. Byron's exploration of Adeline's possession of "mobility" places her equally between the real and the false: Juan does not doubt that she is real, but doubts "how much of her" is. Aurora's idealisation operates in concert with her nature as part-real, her attraction lying not in one or the other quality but in their combination: she "renew[s]" in Juan "feelings he had lately lost / Or hardened; feelings which, perhaps ideal, / Are so divine, that [the poet] must deem them real" (XVI. 107: 901-04): she is "a creature / As pure as sanctity itself from vice, / With all the added charm of form and feature" (XV. 52: 410-12); and she may be "purer than the rest," but she is still "a beauteous ripple of the brilliant stream / Of rank and youth" (XV. 55: 435-36). Fitz-Fulke

masquerades as representative of the supernatural but in her “hard ... bust” (XVI. 122: 1019) and “full, voluptuous ... bulk” (XVI. 123: 1031) her physical substantiality is emphasised. The “menagerie” of English society and of life is, Byron seems to suggest, not simply constitutive of a multiplicity of representative types, blueprints of the ideal, the false, the supernatural; rather, it is peopled by individuals who each possess a shifting multiplicity of elements, with neither any one combination in an individual or any one element within an individual combination being subject to unambiguous valorisation or pejoration, and in presenting characters in this way Byron invites us to take them for all in all, just as we should take our, and his, multiple responses to such characters in the same way.

The focus on modes of communication, and the shift towards the unarticulated, does not derive from Aurora alone. Juan, at dinner “placed between / Aurora and the Lady Adeline” (XV. 75: 593-94), finds not only that the former begins to communicate only “at the last” (XV. 80: 637), but also that the latter “addressing few words towards him, / With two transcendent eyes seemed to look through him” (XV. 75: 599-600), precipitating a digression on “how oft the sex have heard / Long dialogues which passed without a word!” (XV. 76: 607-08), before the poet reiterates how Adeline “look’d as much as if to say, ‘I said it’” (XV. 79: 625). Adeline and Aurora are united in their linguistic uncommunicativeness, with the lines “to his gay nothings, nothing was replied, / Or something which was nothing, as urbanity / required” (XV. 78: 617-19) relating to both women and suggesting, again, the potential meaninglessness of utterance itself. In the manner noted a number of times in this thesis, hierarchies are destabilised multidirectionally, and here it is with the potential communicative power

of the unspoken emphasised in concert with the potential communicative paucity of the spoken.

When Adeline, Aurora and Fitz-Fulke are most directly compared it is in relation to text-making, cementing the association between female representation and Byron's wider exploration of texts in general and his own epic, and the ways in which linguistic utterance negotiates the false, the ideal, and the real. Adeline "could write rhymes, and compose more than she wrote" but was "remote" from "that sublime azure hue, / So much the present dye," and "weak enough to deem Pope a great poet" (XVI. 47: 418-23).<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Aurora "was more Shakespearian," possessing "a depth of feeling to embrace / Thoughts, boundless, deep, but silent too as Space" (XVI. 48: 428-32). Of the "gracious, graceful, graceless Grace" (XVI. 49: 433) Fitz-Fulke it is said her "mind, / If she had any, was upon her face, / And that was of a fascinating kind" (XVI. 49: 434-36), and the poet states that he has "not heard she was at all poetic, / Though once she was seen reading the 'Bath Guide', / And 'Hayley's Triumphs', which she deemed pathetic" (XVI. 50: 441-43).

The account of Adeline's song of the Black Friar provides an interesting vignette of Byron's exploration of articulation and silence. The song itself moves from articulation to silence: the opening stanza describes the Friar "mutter[ing] his prayer in the midnight air" (XVI. "Black Friar" 1: 323), whilst the final stanza – believed to be the only lines of canto XVI written at a later date – warns that we should "Say nought to him as he walks the hall, / And he'll say nought to you" (XVI. "Black Friar"

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<sup>25</sup> A wry nod to Byron's own poetic tastes, the alexandrine's "and what was worse, was not ashamed to show it" (XVI. 47: 424) having a self-reflexive dimension.

6: 361-62). Moreover, the song is framed by the relative power of non-linguistic utterance. Prior to the song, in the midst of Adeline initially dismissing the song as having “... oft been told, / And [being] not much improved by growing old” (XVI. 37: 295-96), Byron offers a parenthetical description of her “divin[ing]” meaning from “watch[ing] the changes of Don Juan’s brow” (XVI. 37: 290-91), and the stanza which moves out from the song to the poem proper (a transition often charged with meaning, as we discussed in Chapter One) provides a focus on the resonance of the silence which ensues, and also by contrast the phatic nature of the sound with which the silence is broken:

The lady’s voice ceased, and the thrilling wires  
 Died from the touch that kindled them to sound;  
 And the pause followed, which when song expires,  
 Pervades a moment those who listen round;  
 And then of course the circle much admires,  
 Nor less applauds as in politeness bound.  
 The tones, the feeling, and the execution,  
 To the performer’s diffident confusion.

(XVI. 41: 369-76)

The song itself is sung “with much simplicity” (XVI. 40: 319), the applause is “in politeness bound”: it is the inaudible hiatus in between which Byron imbues with expressive power.

In the movement towards the song Adeline “seized her harp ... / ... and plaintively began to play” (XVI. 38: 303) until prompted by her husband: ““But add the words,” cried Henry, ‘which you made; / For Adeline is half a poetess”” (XVI. 39: 305-06). There is a mirroring of the movement described in Blake’s Introduction to the *Songs of Innocence* and a reversal of the counter-movement I described above in Byron’s

digression on Adeline's name, and though Byron characterises Adeline as a cut above the "dilettanti" who perform "with vast parade" (XVI: 44: 395), nevertheless his comment on the awkwardness of "Miss That or This, or Lady T'other, / Show[ing] off—to please their company or mother," leading to "the long evenings of duets and trios" (XVI. 44-45: 399-401), in combination with his focus on the communicative power of the non-linguistic, suggests that this is a movement regarding whose efficacy he is having increasing doubts.

It is appropriate, then, that the move to articulation is prompted by the somewhat peremptory Lord Henry, an external imperative imposed on Adeline beyond her instinctual non-verbalisation even if we may view that reluctance as part-feigned; it is also appropriate that she "*seized* her harp" (my italics): the urgency implicit in the verb suggests an internal counter-imperative, Byron through his representation of Adeline feeling the desire to move towards non-articulation in the face of the imperfections he is increasingly finding in linguistic articulation, just as in Chapter One Childe Harold "seiz'd his harp" (*CHP* I. 13: 110) in a movement from the Spenserian stanza's restriction. Adeline's attitude to playing is different from her attitude to singing: she initiated the former and, once seized, the harp's "strings were kindled soon / As touched" (XVI. 38: 302-03); the singing, however, is initiated on her behalf, and "after some fascinating hesitation" Adeline begins "with eyes fixed on the ground / At first," and only "*then* kindling into animation" (my italics) (XVI. 40: 313-17).

It feels as if the song is forced upon the characters a little, and on the reader too,<sup>26</sup> primarily by Lord Henry, whose utterances in canto XVI are an exception, as is the song itself: it is a canto which, for the most part, retreats from verbal articulation. Prior to his first encounter with the ‘Black Friar’, Byron emphasises that rather than “philosophis[ing],” “Juan only sighed. // He sighed” (XVI. 12-13: 96-9), his “mind ... in the proper tone / To hail” the moon “with the apostrophe — ‘Oh, Thou!’” (XVI. 13: 101-02) but going no further. Instead, Byron focuses on the moon’s role as a “resource” where “all sighs are deposited” (XVI. 13: 97-98) and its capacity for generating “great thoughts” and receiving “deep secrets” (XVI. 14: 108-110), as well as depicting the “rippling sound of the lake’s billow” as in tune with Juan’s present “dispos[ition] / For contemplation” (XVI. 15: 113-16).

The first encounter with the Friar is characterised by quietude: immediately before, “no sound except the echo of his sigh / Or step ran sadly through that antique house, / When suddenly he heard, or thought so, nigh / A supernatural agent” (XVI, 20: 55-58); the figure appears “with steps that trod as heavy, yet unheard; / his garments only a slight murmur made” (XVI. 21: 163-65). Juan is almost literally “petrified” (XVI. 22: 169): he “gazed upon it with a stare, / Yet could not speak or move; but, on its base / As stands a statue, stood”; “he taxed his tongue for words, which were not granted” (XVI. 23: 179-84). Juan’s retreat into silence continues: returning to his room, wishing to find something which “savoured of this world” (XVI. 27: 209), he chooses a written text, “read[ing] an article the king attacking, / And a long eulogy of ‘Patent Blacking’” (XVI. 26: 207-08).

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<sup>26</sup> As mentioned in Chapter One, there are only two instances of digressive songs in *Don Juan*: his great epic may test the *ottava rima*’s limits time and again, but Byron does not deviate from the form lightly.



We have an extended description of his preparing for breakfast; at breakfast itself the emphasis – Lord Henry’s inconsequential witterings aside – is on non-verbal or imperfectly-articulated communication:

[Adeline] looked, and saw him pale, and turned as pale  
Herself; then hastily looked down, and muttered  
Something, but what’s not stated in my tale.  
Lord Henry said, his muffin was ill buttered;  
The Duchess of Fitz-Fulke played with her veil,  
And looked at Juan hard, but nothing uttered.  
Aurora Raby, with her large dark eyes,  
Surveyed him with a kind of calm surprise.

(XVI. 31: 241-48)<sup>27</sup>

Juan’s verbal communication, when it comes, is such that it holds its meaning in abeyance: he responds to Adeline asking whether he is ill by saying “‘Yes—no—rather—yes’” (XVI. 32: 252), followed by “‘He was quite well.’ / ‘Quite well; yes, no’” (XVI. 33: 257); it is noted that “these answers were mysterious, / And yet his looks appeared to sanction both” (XVI. 33: 257-58). After the song of the Black Friar, Juan “when cross-questioned on the vision / ... answered in a way to cloud it” (XVI. 54: 478-80). As the canto progresses the focus remains on the non-verbal communication between, particularly, Juan and Aurora; it is said “he saw Aurora look as though / She approved his silence” (XVI. 106: 889-90), and that “the ghost at least had done him this much good, / In making him as silent as a ghost” (XVI. 107: 897-98).

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<sup>27</sup> Lines 245-46 are, it seems to me, an example of non-articulation which the poem imbues with a *retrospective* signification: by the end of the canto, the reader may view the two lines as the moment of genesis for Fitz-Fulke’s subsequent nocturnal excursion.

The spectral by its nature inhabits its own form of liminality, of being and not-being, as a number of critics have explored;<sup>28</sup> as has also been noted, it has its role in deconstructionist thought.<sup>29</sup> However, the Black Friar possesses a liminality with regard to its very liminality: as Peter Graham notes, “as Byron contrives things, the reality or unreality, ghostliness or physicality of the Black Friar remains tantalizingly up for grabs – or indeed ... constantly shifting.”<sup>30</sup> Whilst critics disagree with each other on the matter,<sup>31</sup> and indeed occasionally even with themselves,<sup>32</sup> for me Byron chooses to – as he says of Juan’s response to the encounter with Fitz-Fulke – “leave the thing a problem, like all things” (XVII. 13: 97),<sup>33</sup> and in doing so extends the scope of the form’s inherent ontological instability.<sup>34</sup> The ‘Friar’ is clearly material in the second encounter, and as a construct it is clearly doubly textualised – part of the text of *Don Juan* and the song within that text – and, as Graham notes, the encounters are

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<sup>28</sup> *Byron’s Ghosts* – drawn upon a number of times in this thesis – offers a number of such explorations.

<sup>29</sup> See “The Ghost Dance: An Interview with Jacques Derrida by Andrew Payne and Mark Lewis,” trans. Jean-Luc Svoboda, in *Public 2* (1989): 60-67, and *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994). As Gavin Hopps notes, Derrida claims in *Specters of Marx* that “the logic of spectrality” is “inseparable from the very motif ... of deconstruction,” 225, n. 3; quoted in *Byron’s Ghosts*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> “The Haunting of *Don Juan*,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 184-201, 186.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard Beatty, for example, writes: “I think that the first ghost is a real ghost and the second is obviously that of Fitz-Fulke. Is it possible to be certain on this matter? Of course not. But we can say that it is highly probable given the clear clues in the text.” “Determining Unknown Modes of Being: A Map of Byron’s Ghosts and Spirits,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 30-47, 44. It is a comment to which this thesis returns in its Conclusion.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Graham begins his essay in *Byron’s Ghosts* by stating that “the haunting of Don Juan ... has haunted [him] for a long time,” and notes how he had, in *Don Juan and Regency England*, “followed the Byronic narrator’s injunction and considered Don Juan’s first encounter with the Black Friar an actual haunting of some sort,” but “could never totally exorcize” the “possibility ... that both visits might be instances of the fictively material impersonating the immaterial,” leading to his later reconsideration, “The Haunting of *Don Juan*,” 184-85. Cf. also Graham, 157-96.

<sup>33</sup> We should note, of course, that we do not know whether Byron would have returned to the subject of the first ghost’s appearance if his epic had been continued.

<sup>34</sup> It is something we have encountered before in Byron: see Chapter One’s discussion of Byron extending the inherent ontological instability of Prefaces and epigraphs as spaces between text and not-text through his use of language in the Preface to the first two cantos of *Childe Harold*.

“a narratological hybrid”<sup>35</sup> – but the nature of the first encounter is left unclear and possessed of a “mutable spectrality.”<sup>36</sup>

The encounter with which this final completed canto ends is one in which Byron demonstrates his retreat from articulation most clearly. The descriptive retreat from articulation explored in the stanza on Adeline’s “pretty name” manifests itself here on the level of narrative. Immediately prior to the encounter Juan is “full of sentiments, sublime as billows / Heaving between this world and worlds beyond” (XVI. 110: 921-22), sitting “with feelings awkward to express” (XVI. 111: 934): the sentiments, the feelings, are allowed their amorphous, uncatchable complexity without an attempt to corral them into articulated forms. There is a paring-back, a retreat from obfuscating complexity, and it seems appropriate in this context that Byron emphasises Juan’s absence, or almost-absence, of clothing:

He was undrest,  
Saving his night gown, which is an undress;  
Completely ‘sans culotte,’ and without vest;  
In short, he could be hardly clothed with less.  
(XVI. 111: 929-32)

Like the Blank-Blank Square, a presence is noted which speaks of absence, a framing of non-being, much in the manner of the loosely-held poetry of both our poets. And in-keeping with both the manner of the raw half-articulated responses Juan gives at breakfast, and the notion of “present life” as “but an Interjection” (XV. 1: 5), Juan’s

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<sup>35</sup> Graham’s exploration of the Friar’s indeterminacy draws in large part on the ways in which the “two essentially different sets of conventions” – those of “the Gothic supernatural tale and those of the civilised comedy of manners” are often “balanced against one another” in order to keep the question “ghost or girl?” unresolved. “The Haunting of Don Juan,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 192; 199.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

waiting and listening is conveyed in half-formed articulations: “—Hush! What’s that? / I see—I see—Ah, no!—’tis not—yet ’tis— / Ye powers! It is the—the—the—Pooh! The cat!” (XVI. 112: 937-39) and “Again—what is’t? The wind? No, no,—” (XVI. 113: 945). The speech verbalises unregimented articulation such that the lines are communicative because they lack the formalised communicatory mode; similarly, Juan’s encounter with the Friar is one in which there is a repeated framing of an absence of full articulation. The Friar arrives “with awful footsteps regular as rhyme, / Or (as rhymes may be in these days) much more” (XVI. 113: 947-48): a tattoo representative of the space in which communication occurs but stopping short of specified expression. Then:

A noise like to wet fingers drawn on glass,  
Which sets the teeth on edge; and a slight clatter  
Like showers which on the midnight gusts will pass,  
Sounding like very supernatural water,  
Came over Juan’s ear, which throbbed, alas!  
(XVI. 114: 953-57)

Adeline’s “sweet voice” (XVI. 40: 318) as she sings of the Black Friar gives way at the canto’s close to the harsh discord of sound devoid of articulation’s mellifluous harmony, just as Byron moves from Adeline’s “pretty name” to end his final complete canto with “her frolic Grace, Fitz-Fulke!” (XVI. 123: 1032), the stridency of the name’s Prufrock-like discord standing – after sixteen cantos of self-aware attendance to the processes of text-making – as phonological testament to Byron’s ultimate suspicion of smooth articulation as allied with false and fictionalised representation.

What characterises this encounter is not silence *per se*: rather, and again in a way which has similarities with the first act of *Prometheus Unbound*, it is the framed non-utterance – not simply the absence of linguistic articulation but the shaped presence of linguistic articulation’s absence. It is the pre-linguistic, in the sense of non-formalised sound but also in the sense of the thought prior to utterance. Juan’s response is silence, but it is a silence which Byron conveys in such a way that the shadow of the utterance unmade is pointed up:

Were his eyes open?—Yes! and his mouth too.  
 Surprise has this effect—to make one dumb,  
 Yet leave the gate which Eloquence slips through  
 As wide as if a long speech were to come.  
 Nigh and more nigh the awful echoes drew,  
 Tremendous to a mortal tympanum:  
 His eyes were open, and (as was before  
 Stated) his mouth.

(XVI. 115: 961-68)

It is a striking image: Juan’s face is as the masks of Greek tragedy, receptive and witness-bearing, speaking in their non-speaking of things at which articulation balks. The description of the Friar has a similar focus:

But still the shade remained; the blue eyes glared,  
 And rather variably for stony death;  
 Yet one thing rather good the grave had spared,  
 The ghost had a remarkably sweet breath.  
 A straggling curl showed he had been fair-haired;  
 A red lip, with two rows of pearls beneath,  
 Gleamed forth, as through the casement’s ivy shroud  
 The moon peeped, just escaped from a grey cloud.

(XVI. 121: 1009-17)

The encounter may “serve the interests of eros and of narrative,”<sup>37</sup> but it serves more than that. We have moved from Adeline’s adept eloquence and “sweet voice” and Aurora’s paralinguistic communicativeness to the unspeaking mouth with its “sweet breath,” emblematic in its silence of the thought yet to be obfuscated by utterance: emblematic, perhaps, of the poetry itself, neither ideal nor real but a loosely-held combination of the two, present and delineated into language yet attempting always to hold its provisionality, thought on the cusp of utterance.

It is no accident that Byron’s retreat from linguistic articulation is made manifest through his representations of the female, for both are allied in a return to origin in the face of doubt over his work’s efficacy and the problems of erroneous transmission. However, though we may see yonic symbolism in the focus on the unspeaking mouth, Byron’s framing of absence and his return to origin permeates these cantos on a symbolic, descriptive and narrative level which moves beyond such specific associations. In the lines above we see, united by that Byronic favourite, “gleamed,” the image of the moon peeping through the casement. The stanza’s final couplet works on more than one level, pivoting on the multivalent “as”: in narrative terms, the moon’s light literally illuminates the lips and teeth; in descriptive terms, a simile operates to illuminate our apprehension of the same. The casement, like the mouth, is a space which frames the ephemeral and half-formed (the moon “peep[ing],” having “just escaped from a grey cloud”), and it is a demonstration of the extent to which physical location is not just the place in which Byron’s process of return occurs, but

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<sup>37</sup> Bernard Beatty, “Determining Unknown Modes of Being: A Map of Byron’s Ghosts and Spirits,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 45.

rather it is a central element expressive of that process.<sup>38</sup> The stanza describing Juan's open mouth and eyes ends "What opened next?—the door" (XVI. 115: 968), continuing into the next stanza as follows:

It opened with a most infernal creak,  
 Like that of Hell. 'Lasciate ogni speranza  
 Voi che entrate!' The hinge seemed to speak,  
 Dreadful as Dante's Rima, or this stanza;  
 Or—but all words on such themes are weak;  
 A single shade's sufficient to entrance a  
 Hero—for what is substance to a Spirit?  
 Or how is't *matter* trembles to come near it?

(XVI. 116: 969-76)

The door's non-linguistic sound possesses a primal eloquence, expressed alongside a comment upon words' inadequacy. The stanza's closing couplet continues a discussion on the relationship between the material and the immaterial begun two stanzas earlier in the punning fashion we noted in Chapter Three ("for immaterialism's a serious matter" (XVI. 114: 958)), and as we move into the next stanza we see the door operating as a liminal framing of a figure who, at this point, appears to occupy a liminal position between the material and the supernatural:

The door flew wide, not swiftly—but, as fly  
 The sea-gulls, with a steady, sober flight—  
 And then swung back; nor close—but stood awry,  
 Half letting in long shadows on the light,  
 Which still in Juan's candlesticks burned high,  
 For he had two, both tolerably bright,  
 And in the door-way, darkening Darkness, stood  
 The sable Friar in his solemn hood.

(XVI. 117: 977-84)

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<sup>38</sup> As Alison Milbank notes, "the Abbey is truly Gothic in that it is both a protagonist in its own right and a building that is spatially and temporally active." "Byron, Ann Radcliffe and the Religious Implications of the Explained Supernatural in *Don Juan*," *Byron's Ghosts*, 165-83, 176.

Thus the physical location operates both as emblematic of the figure's liminal and provisional nature and as a framing of that liminality and provisionality.

This pattern is representative of the use of location within these cantos, and it is a pattern which is more delicately keyed than it may at first seem. Bernard Beatty begins his exploration of "Byron's spirit topography"<sup>39</sup> by noting that "it is fashionable, still, to press the case for discontinuities and indeterminacies" and suggesting that, "in this view of things" ghosts "would most naturally be seen as liminal."<sup>40</sup> After acknowledging that "it is certainly true" that "a liminal context is ... set up" when Byron writes about ghosts in these cantos, Beatty implies that, in fact, such simple liminality mischaracterises Byron's approach to ghosts in that "Byron thought through categories, outlines and analogies as well as through processes and mergings,"<sup>41</sup> noting later Byron's tendency to be "at pains to stress the materiality of"<sup>42</sup> representations of ghosts and spirits (even when they actually *are* ghosts and spirits rather than Fitz-Fulke). Beatty's instincts are right that seeing Byron in terms of pure indeterminacy is a mischaracterisation, and the thinking through of categories, outlines and analogies which Beatty suggests of Byron certainly has some resonance with the focus of this thesis. However, the implication here is that liminality is *de facto* a state of discontinuity and indeterminacy, when, in fact, I would argue that what Byron constructs is a determinate space of liminality: a framed absence, simultaneously interactive and free yet discrete and bound. The various framed liminalities of the Fitz-

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 39.



Fulke encounter are by no means the only manifestation of this paradoxical positioning.

## V

If we look back to the introduction of Lady Adeline, we see that she is first mentioned between references to ruin and the Gothic:

And therefore shall my lay soar high and solemn,  
As an old temple dwindled to a column.

The Lady Adeline Amundeville  
(‘Tis an old Norman name, and to be found  
In pedigrees, by those who wander still  
Along the last fields of that Gothic ground)—  
(XIII. 1-2: 7-12)

Juan is of Gothic blood – nine stanzas into *Don Juan*, we are told that his father “traced his source / Through the most Gothic gentlemen of Spain” (I. 9: 68) – but it is a full ten cantos, over ten thousand lines and four years of writing before the word is used again, “a grey wall, a green ruin, rusty pike” within “ye glorious Gothic scenes!” of “the castellated Rhine” sufficient to “make [the poet’s] soul pass the equinoctial line / Between the present and past worlds and hover / Upon their airy confine, half-seas-over” (X, 61: 483-88). It disappears from use again until Adeline’s introduction, from which point it is used eleven times (including one “Goth”), peppering the cantos right up to the final stanza of the unfinished canto XVII (14: 109), as if the poet enacts a movement into – perhaps a withdrawal into – a particular mode of articulation in the

form of genre tropes as he embraces a “deliberate use of stock Gothic horror motifs.”<sup>43</sup> Just as “the castellated Rhine” leaves the poet hovering between the present and the past world of antiquity, so it appears that the Gothic and ruin operate as a spur to involuntary memory, evocative of a process of return from physical and poetic journeying.

Ruin, the Gothic and Lady Adeline come together in their association with Norman Abbey. It is “the Gothic Babel of a thousand years” (XIII. 50: 396), a “Gothic pile” (XIII. 59: 465) “of a rich and rare / Mix’d Gothic” (XIII. 55: 435-36) with a “Gothic fountain” (XIII. 65: 513), a “Gothic window” (XVII. 14: 109) and a “Gothic chamber” (XVI. 15: 115) with “many a gothic ornament” (XVI. 16: 126), surveyed by “a modern Goth, I mean a Gothic / Bricklayer of Babel, called an architect” (XVI. 58: 505-506), whose proposed work would be an example of “Gothic daring shown in English money” (XVI. 59: 520). Of course, like his protagonist, Byron had his Gothic origins too, in the form of Newstead Abbey, which, as Fiona McCarthy notes, is “reincarnated” in the Amundevilles’ rural seat,<sup>44</sup> albeit, as Peter Graham suggests, “new and improved.”<sup>45</sup> Newstead “in effect ... is a house grafted on a ruin, with the great east window of the church, the monastic hall, refectory and cloister still eerily intact,”<sup>46</sup> and this same mixture of residence and relic characterises the Norman Abbey of these cantos – as, indeed, it characterises Byron’s feelings about and approach to English society, at once extant and extinct. Again, in the guise of moving forward, Byron enacts a return. It is a return, too, to that other avatar of Newstead, the “vast and venerable” (*CHP* I. 7: 56) place from which Byron departed on his poetic journey to

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>44</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: Faber, 2003), 19.

<sup>45</sup> Graham, 184.

<sup>46</sup> MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend*, 15.

fame with Childe Harold, Byron even recycling the phrase in the later work (XIII. 66: 521). There is a pattern here: in Chapter Three I noted how the Childe's "deserted ... hall" (*CHP* I. "Last 'Good Night'" 2: 130) seems to haunt him, with descriptive echoes in the "halls deserted" of Cintra (*CHP* I. 23: 284) and the "mouldering tower[s]" (*CHP* II. 2: 17) of Athens; in Chapter Five I noted that the English cantos begin with a determination to "with a soft besom ... sweep your halls, / And brush a web or two from off the walls" (X. 84: 671-72); and the strongest of the Ossianic poems from Byron's juvenilia begins with "when, to their airy hall, my fathers' voice, / Shall call my spirit" (*A Fragment*, 1-2).<sup>47</sup> Michael O'Neill observes that "Romantic quests for 'home' are endless, and often involve the epiphanic or even eerie awareness that the imagination's true dwelling-place is homelessness."<sup>48</sup> Cintra, Athens, Norman Abbey: all part of Byron's long poetic journeying from and to home, and all representative echoes suggesting that he never really left at all, the "soft besom" of his poetic making failing, ultimately, to sweep those halls of their ghosts.

Byron gives eighteen stanzas of canto XII over to a description of Norman Abbey. The description possesses three key, interrelated characteristics, each speaking of mobility and provisionality. First, there is much focus on water, with three stanzas devoted to its motion (XIII. 57-58: 449-64; 65: 513-20) and regular mentions elsewhere. The mobility of water, emphasised by Byron's dancing enjambment and caesura, is vocative: the brook "murmur[s]" (XIII. 56: 448), the lake is described using the multivalent "lucid" (XIII. 58: 449), the river's outlet has "shrill ... echoes" (XIII.

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<sup>47</sup> *BMW*, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Michael O'Neill, "Realms Without a Name: Shelley and Italy's Intenser Day," *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 77-92, 77.

58: 459). Furthermore, its mobility forms both “centre and circumference”<sup>49</sup> of the abbey, which is surrounded by brook, lake and river, and has “amidst the court a Gothic fountain” which “play[s]” (XIII. 65: 513): “the spring gush’d through grim mouths, of granite made, / And sparkled into basins, where it spent / Its little torrent in a thousand bubbles” (XIII. 65: 517-19), just as the “bubbling” of a “spring of living water” at Tepalen “did a genial freshness fling” within the “marble-pav’d pavilion” in *Childe Harold* (II. 62: 550-53).

The second key characteristic of the abbey is its “mixed” (XIII. 55: 436) nature: not just of residence and ruin, but an amalgam of styles. The description Byron gives would stand well as a description of his poem:

Huge halls, long galleries, spacious chambers, join’d  
 By no quite lawful marriage of the Arts,  
 Might shock a Connoisseur; but, when combined,  
 Form’d a whole which, irregular in parts,  
 Yet left a grand impression on the mind,  
 At least of those whose eyes are in their hearts.  
(XIII. 67: 529-34)

Norman Abbey, like *Don Juan* itself, defies fixed delineation and operates in such a way that its static nature – as architectural structure; as written poem – is undermined in favour of a permeating interplay.

The third characteristic of Norman Abbey on which Byron focuses is its nature as part ruin, and in his description we see the abbey to be emblematic of his poem in a further

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<sup>49</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, SMW, 696.

way. Like the name “Blank-Blank Square” mentioned in Chapter Five, like Juan and Fitz-Fulke’s gaping mouths, like the resolutely pre-linguistic sounds and non-sounds of the later cantos, like the representations of the female as evocative of erroneous transmission, like Byron’s unknowing inversion of Blake’s scale of complex articulation, like the movement towards silence, and like those fathers’ halls to which he is ever returning, in Norman Abbey we find another evocation of the loose holding of poetic making: the framed space. Between the description of the bodies of water outside the abbey and the description of the central fountain within sits the “glorious remnant of the Gothic pile” (XIII. 59: 465), standing:

half apart  
 In a grand Arch, which once screened many an aisle.  
 These last had disappear’d—a loss to Art:  
 The first yet frowned superbly o’er the soil,  
 And kindled feelings in the roughest heart,  
 Which mourn’d the power of time’s or tempest’s march,  
 In gazing on that venerable Arch.  
(XIII. 59: 466-72)

The ruin possesses a liminal position, part of yet not part of the “Gothic pile”; what is left is the Arch, a physical construction and also a framing of space, both “grand” and “venerable,” and highly evocative. Like the “latent grandeur” of the “massy stone” upon which we left the poet at the end of Chapter Three, in “glorious remnant” Byron holds equally the sense of power existing despite its ruined state and power existing because of that ruined state – evocative, able to kindle feelings due to its nature as not perfected, as not whole, as delineated absence.

The two stanzas which follow give equal weight to two niches near the arch, “nigh to its pinnacle” (XIII. 60: 473): the first is empty, Byron describing how “twelve saints had once stood sanctified in stone; / But these had fallen” (XIII. 60: 474-75). He continues:

But, in a higher niche, alone, but crown’d,  
The Virgin Mother of the God-born child,  
With her son in her blessed arms, look’d round,  
Spared by some chance when all beside was spoil’d;  
She made the earth below seem holy ground.

(XIII. 61: 481-85)

The present image and the absent image work in concert as a catalyst for feeling, each evoking the other. The stanza ends with the poet a sudden Larkin fumbling with his bicycle clips:<sup>50</sup> “this may be superstition, weak or wild, / But even the faintest relics of a shrine / Of any worship, wake some thoughts divine” (XIII. 61: 486-87). The penultimate line is delicately cadenced: with the shift to an anapaestic second foot affording the line’s adjective ever so slightly greater emphasis over the nouns which follow, and with the enjambment subtly diminishing the potential emphasis on “shrine” accorded by an end-stopped line, “faintest” attaches itself to the long noun phrase rather than specifically to “relics.” As discussion of the “massy stone” in Chapter Three suggested, for Byron it is not shrines which “wake some thoughts divine” but specifically shrines in their ruination.

Gavin Hopps has commented on Byron’s “frequently overlooked reverence,”<sup>51</sup> and points approvingly towards Stephen Cheeke’s observation of a Byronic “etiquette of

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<sup>50</sup> “Church Going.” *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*, ed. and introd. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 1988), 97-98.

<sup>51</sup> “Byron and the Trespassing of Ontology,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 48-82, 51.

lowered voices in holy places ... as if a spot consecrated by events of historical significance becomes a kind of church.”<sup>52</sup> I would add, though, that not all holy places are treated equally. Reverence and “thoughts divine” tend to occur amidst the “relics” of ruined places, whereas intact holy places tend to evoke something more secular in nature. It is true that the response to St. Peter’s in canto IV of *Childe Harold* is a “dilat[ing]” of “our spirits to the size of that they contemplate” (*CHP* IV. 158: 1421-22), allowing us to “be enlightened” by the “depth” of “the fountain of sublimity” (*CHP* IV. 159: 1429-30). However, Byron is keen to present such a response as less immediate than at a site of ruin – “enlighten[ment]” needs to be reached for by moving beyond lesser but more immediate responses evoked by the building as intact and complete:

Then pause, and be enlightened; there is more  
 In such a survey than the satiating gaze  
 Of wonder pleased, or awe which would adore  
 The worship of the place, or the mere praise  
 Of art and its great masters ...  
(*CHP* IV. 159: 1423-27)<sup>53</sup>

The form crystallised in its perfected state is diminished in its capacity to generate feeling: feelings are kindled in that which is between states, shifting, mobile; form in its breach rather than its observance, each only made manifest in relation to the other.

The focus on the power of framed absence continues:

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<sup>52</sup> Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 52. Quoted in “Shades of Being: Byron and the Trespassing of Ontology,” *Byron’s Ghosts*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> As with Chapter Four footnote 1, these lines are taken from *BCPW*, vol. ii. *BMW* gives line 1425 as “Of wonder please, or awe which would adore.” The lines as stated conform to general editorial consensus.

A mighty window, hollow in the centre,  
 Shorn of its glass of thousand colourings,  
 Through which the deepen'd glories once could enter,  
 Streaming from off the sun like seraph's wings,  
 Now yawns all desolate: now loud, now fainter,  
 The gale sweeps through its fretwork, and oft sings  
 The owl his anthem, where the silenced quire  
 Lie with their hallelujahs quench'd like fire.

But in the noontide of the moon, and when  
 The wind is winged from one point of heaven,  
 There moans a strange unearthly sound, which then  
 Is musical—a dying accent driven  
 Through the huge arch, which soars and sinks again.

(XIII. 62-63: 489-501)

The capacity for the ruined space to “kindle ... feelings” is here given expression in an image redolent of the Aeolian harp. The framed space in which mobile and vital creation occurs is paradoxically evocative precisely because it speaks of a loss, of an absence of the “deepen’d glories” which “once could enter”: the sound is imperfect, not fully articulated, the place mostly “desolate” but capable at times of a catching of “a strange unearthly sound, which then / Is musical.” The “then” is a return to Byron’s deictic phrasing, suggesting that the power lies in part in its ephemerality, the fact that it is “a dying accent,” and that it “soars and sinks,” unfixed and subject to time. The “deepen’d glories” of the complex and specific, delineated and precisely crafted, are evoked by their very absence: here we have something more primal, if only because in its interaction with the intimations of the perfected but lost it is able to “kindle ... feelings.”

Blake’s poet “stain[s] the water clear” in his commitment of pen to page; Shelley in *Adonais* describes “life, like a dome of many-coloured glass” which “stains the white



radiance of Eternity” (52). Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill gloss Shelley’s verb as “enriches or disfigures,”<sup>54</sup> and it is surely both at once, equally held, as it is in Blake’s line; for Byron in these later cantos of his great epic, we sense that linguistic utterance has come to disfigure more than enrich, and it is thus the framed space “shorn of its glass of thousand colourings,” operated on and through by the imagination, which holds the greater potency of meaning. The danger of the great potency of meaning which may lie within the framed absence of the poetry of Byron and Shelley is that it only *may* lie: that it is a “sort of Ignis-fatuus of the mind” (XI. 27: 214), a step away from nothing, and Byron admits – as he always admits – of the quotidian in his comment upon the “strange unearthly sound”:

Some deem it but the distant echo given  
Back to the night wind by the waterfall,  
And harmonised by the old choral wall:

Others, that some original shape, or form  
Shaped by decay perchance, hath given the power

...  
To this grey ruin, with a voice to charm.  
Sad, but serene, it sweeps o’er tree or tower;  
The cause I know not, nor can solve; but such  
The fact:—I’ve heard it,—once perhaps too much.

(XIII. 63-64: 502-12)

Caveats abound: it may be simply what “some deem it”; the “power” may come from either “some original shape” or a “form / Shaped by decay perchance”; the word “charm” (like the “uttered charm” of the “frail spells” (29) in Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”) speaks of the possibility that it beguiles; and whether it beguiles or not, Byron admits of its ineffability, that he must “leave the thing a problem, like

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<sup>54</sup> SMW, 84.

all things” (XVII. 13: 97), as he states before leaving his poem for good. But as the final couplet makes clear, the power of this framed absence – of this “something which was nothing” (XV. 78: 618) which is “at once centre and circumference”<sup>55</sup> – calls to him, and it is this to which he seems to return in these later cantos in the face of the shortcomings of linguistic utterance. Like ruin, the poems of Byron and Shelley are “form[s] / Shaped by decay perchance,” holding in the deliberation of their shaping the vitality of chance, both existing on the page but ever mobile, half-aware that the poetic process is about both formation and decay, equally entropic and creative.

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<sup>55</sup> *A Defence of Poetry*, 696.

## CONCLUSION

Like the martial cantos which precede them, Byron's English cantos are profoundly concerned with the complexities of representation, of verity and of text-making: of the gaps between the representation and that which is represented. Its expression may be Byron's but the fundamental concern is one shared by Shelley. In the face of language which will always fail to accurately present that which the poet wishes to present, the poet seeks to create a text, inevitably through the imperfect mode of linguistic utterance, which ameliorates in its operations the potential calcification into fixed and false representation which inheres in that mode. Byron and Shelley in different ways create texts which attempt to hold their mobile provisionality, often self-consciously attendant to the losses inherent in articulation, and to an understanding of the fact that creativity expressed through the imperfect tool of language is at once a destructive and constructive act, inevitably involving an opening of gaps between the unarticulated and the articulation. When Cleanth Brooks suggested that we should not subject poetry to "the heresy of paraphrase,"<sup>1</sup> we nodded assent at the losses attendant in such a transmutation; for Byron and Shelley there is a keen awareness that poetic making itself, all articulation, is in this sense heretical. *Prometheus Unbound's* Demogorgon expresses something central to Shelley's poetic operations when he proclaims that "the deep truth is imageless" (*PU* II. iv. 116), and we should not forget that the lines are preceded by "a voice / Is wanting" (*PU* II. iv. 115-6): we sense in the English cantos Byron's sense that the deep truth is voiceless too.

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<sup>1</sup> I take the phrase from a chapter title in Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*.

As Trelawny seeks a plot for Shelley's ashes in the cemetery where Keats already lies, Byron embarks on these final two cantos, striving to articulate a world whose various articulations only serve to point up the distance between the representation and the reality. Additionally, the world that Byron has found is one in which there is a disconcerting foundering of his own predication of mobility as antonymic to, or at least a palliative force in relation to, stasis – a world in which the more things change the more they stay the same – and faced with motion refigured not as energised vitality but as cyclical enervation, we see a poet trying on varying modes of articulation until he seeks, paradoxically, a powerfully-articulated withdrawal from articulation itself. As Byron's death forces an end to his epic, we are left with a work whose mobility tantalises with its promise to stave off the enervation of fixity, elegant and powerful in its elegiac failure to do so.

Yet such elegiac failure is surely the poem's form of successfulness, engagement with enervation its source of energy to the extent that the distinction between the terms is problematized, as so many distinctions are problematized in both poets' work: between separation and sameness, product and process, articulation and non-articulation, fixity and flux, presence and absence, journey and destination. This study has pointed towards dichotomies in existing criticism on the subject of mobility with regard to these poets, and asserted that this is allied to a fruitful and generative dichotomy existing *in potentia* within the poets' work. At one extreme, the extent of – or even the existence of – the poems' mobile operations as a source of meaning-making is not given due regard; at the other, criticism centres on permutations and performativity of mobility in and of itself such that there is little meaning either within or beyond it. Each extreme leads us towards a less-than-full appreciation of the poets'

work, but they are critical tendencies which, taken together, are paradoxically instructive to our understanding of the texts because they speak to the vitalising effect of the performatively pointed up *potentiality* of the veracity of such extremes within the poems.

In engaging with the poems' formal operations in a way which remains alive to their multiple mobilities, this study has shown Shelley's poetry to be a holding of vitalising operations and equally vitalising flirtations with concretising interpretative delineations, just as it has shown Byron's to be an engagement with the possibilities of motion and change which is charged with a concomitant engagement with the limitations of those possibilities. Interpretations which seek, or find, concretised meaning, fail to adequately represent the Shelleyan or Byronic poem; interpretations which seek, or find, a linguistic play in Shelley or a multiplicity of perspectives in Byron devoid of meaning beyond their own selves, equally fail in adequate representation. As Michael O'Neill notes with regard to Shelley, "there is power in [the poet's] evocation of a state in which distinctions fail,"<sup>2</sup> but for both poets it is a power which lies as much in the potentiality of those distinctions as in the half-happy failings of their delineations, and to overlook the mutuality of these roles in their poetic making is to miss much. It is the difference between seeing the poets as writing as if the ink will never dry and seeing the poets as writing with a varying awareness that the ink is always drying.

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<sup>2</sup> O'Neill, 41.

In my final chapter I mentioned Bernard Beatty's belief that Don Juan's first encounter with the Black Friar is with a real ghost: that whilst it is not certain, for Beatty evidence points in that direction. He adds to this that "interpretation, which is a form of rational belief, has its home in probabilities rather than certainties or indeterminacies."<sup>3</sup> He is, of course, correct in this statement. What this thesis has demonstrated is that close interpretation of the poems of Byron and Shelley must leave us with the rational belief in the probability that movements between "certainties [and] indeterminacies," fixities and flux, are a key part of what we mean when we speak of the Byronic or Shelleyan poem. The poems are theatres of contention, enactive arenas of vital instability and, like the ruins of "Baiae's bay" which stand "quivering within the wave's intenser day" (32-34),<sup>4</sup> or the poet sitting upon the "massy stone" (*CHP* II. 10: 82) amidst the ruins of antiquity, it is in the instability of engagement with the half-formed, the imperfectly-formed and the ever-forming that the poems enact their own forms of achievement. As this study has shown, critical conversations appertaining to Byron and Shelley may gain much in addressing the extent to which the poems are enactments of critical conversations of their own.

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<sup>3</sup> "Determining Unknown Modes of Being: A Map of Byron's Ghosts and Spirits," *Byron's Ghosts*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> "Ode to the West Wind."

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